

P O P E J A C Y N T H
AND MORE
S~~U~~PERNATURAL TALES

POPE JACYNTH AND SUPERNATURAL TALES

*Excursions
Fantasy*

VERNON I



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Pope Jacynth

Forming a portion of the *Codex Eburneus* of the suppressed Abbey of Nonantola.

It was Pope Jacynth who built anew the basilica over the bodies of the holy martyrs, Paul and John, brothers; and who wainscoted the choir, and laid down the flooring, and set up the columns of the nave, a row on either side, all of precious marble. And it was of his death and the marvellous thing which was seen afterward, showing indeed the justice of God and His infinite mercy, that the following tale is told.

This Jacynth, whose name in the world and in the cloister was Odo, was known all through Italy, and through the Marquisate of Tuscany and the County of Benevento, and the Kingdom of Sicily and such dominions as belonged to the Grecian Emperors, for his great and unparalleled humility and his exceeding ardent and exclusive love of God. And in these lay his ruin. For, even as is written in the book of the Prophet Job, which it were sin for any layman to read, and damnation for any clerk to translate, that the Lord allowed Satan to try his faithful servant with many plagues and doubts and evil incitements, so it pleased Him who is the Mirror of all Truth, to make a wager with Satan concerning the soul of this man Odo or otherwise Jacynth. And this when he was still in his mother's womb. For the Lord said to Satan: "I grant leave that thou tempt any man whatsoever at My choice among such as shall be born into the world before the sun, which turns for ever round earth, shall have gone back to the spot where it now is."

And Satan caused the man Odo, afterwards Jacynth, to be born to the greatest dignity in his land, even to be

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firstborn of Averard, Marquis of Tusculum. But Odo cared not for the greatness of his birth, and the wealth of his father's house. And, being only fourteen years of age, he fled from his parents and went on the ship of a certain mariner, who brought even wine and tanned hides and fair white stone for building from Greece, Istria, and Salernum, to the port of Rome, which is below Mount Aventine, and took back the fleece of sheep and thin cheese, and slabs of porphyry and serpentine from the temples of the heathen. But Satan caused Odo to grow most marvelously in beauty and shapeliness of body and loveliness of countenance and sweetness of voice, so that pirates captured him and sold him, being eighteen years of age, to Alecto, Queen of the Amazons, which inhabit the isles beyond the pillars of Hercules, and are most wondrously fair women. And Queen Alecto became enamoured of the beauty of Odo, otherwise Jacynth, and offered him her love and every delight. But Jacynth scourged himself with ropes of thistles, and ate only of the fruit of the prickly pear and drank only of water from the marshes; and he shaved his head and stained his face with certain herbs, and consorted with lepers, and spurned the queen and her delicacies.

Then Satan caused Odo, otherwise Jacynth, to increase most mightily in strength and courage, so that he could wrestle with the lions in the desert and cleave a strong man in twain with one blow. So that the people, seeing his might and wondering greatly thereat, made him their captain, captain even over hundreds, that he might avenge them on certain wicked kings, their neighbours, and clear the country of robbers and wild beasts. But when he had put the kings in chains and thrown the robbers into dungeons, and exterminated the wild beasts, Jacynth, who was then called Odo, put up his sword and allowed not that any man should be killed or sold into captivity, and

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bade them desist from slaying the hares and deer and wild asses, saying that these also were creatures of God and worthy of kindness. And he was at this time thirty-two years of age.

Then Satan caused Odo, later to be called Jacynth, to exceed all other men in subtlety of mind. And he learned all languages, both living and dead, as those of the Grecians, Romans, Ethiopians, and even of Armorica and Taprobane; and studied all books on philosophy, divine and natural astrology, medicine, music, alchemy, the properties of herbs and numbers, magic and poetry and rhetoric, whatsoever books have been written since the building of Babel, when all languages were dispersed. And he went from place to place teaching and disputing; and whithersoever he went, and mostly in Paris and at Salernum: did he challenge all doctors, rabbis, and men of learning to discuss with him on any subject of their choice, and always did he demonstrate before all men that their arguments were wrong and their science vain. But when Odo, otherwise Jacynth, had done this, he burned his books, save the gospels, and retired to a monastery of his founding. And he was at this time forty and five years of age.

Then Satan caused Odo, later called Jacynth, to become wondrously knowing of the heart of man and his wickedness, and wondrous full of unction and fervour, and all men came to his monastery, which was called Clear Streams, and listened to his preaching and reformed their ways, and many put themselves under his rule, and of these there were such multitudes that the monastery would not hold them, and others had to be built in all parts of the world. And kings and emperors confessed to him their sins, and stood at his bidding clothed in sackcloth at the church door, singing the penitential psalms and holding lighted tapers.

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But Odo, later called Jacynth, instituted abbots and heads of the order, and for himself retired into the wild places of the mountains and built himself there a hermitage of stone quarried with his own hands, and planted fruit-trees and pot-herbs, and lived there alone, praying and meditating, high up near the well-head of the river which runs down through the woods to the Tyrrhene Sea. And he was sixty years of age.

And Satan went up before the Lord and said, "Verily I can tempt him yet. Grant me, I pray Thee, but the use of Thine own tools, and I will bring Thee the soul of this man bound in mortal sin." And the Lord answered, "I grant it." And at the prayer of Satan, God caused him to be acclaimed as pope. And the cardinals and prelates and princes of the earth journeyed to the hermitage, and sought for the man Odo, who henceforth was to be called Jacynth. And they found him in his orchard pruning a fig-tree, and by his side were the herbs for his supper in a clean platter, and the gospel lay on his lectern, and there stood by it a tame goat, ready to be milked; and on a hook hung his red hat, and a crucifix was by the lectern. And in the wall of his garden, which was small, with a well in the midst and set round with wooden pillars, was a window, with a pillar carved of stone in the middle, and through the window one could see the oak woods below, and the olive-yards, and the river winding through the valley, and the Tyrrhene Sea, with ships sailing, in the distance. Now when he saw the cardinals and prelates and princes of the earth, Odo, who was thenceforth called Jacynth, put down his pruning-hook; and when he had heard their message he wept, and knelt before the crucifix, and wept again, and cried, "Woe's me! Terrible are the trials of Thy servants, O Lord, and great must be Thy mercy." But he went with them to be crowned Pope, because his heart was full of humbleness

Pope Jacynth.

and the love of God. And Pope Jacynth, formerly Odo, was seventy-five years of age when they set him on his throne.

And the Lord called to him Satan, and was angered, and said, "What wilt thou do next, Accursed One?" And Satan replied, "I will do no more, O Lord. Suffer this man but to live the space of five years, and then watch we for our wager."

And they took Pope Jacynth, once called Odo, and carried him to the palace, which is over against the Church of St. Peter, and before which stands the pine cone of brass, made as a talisman by the Emperor Adrian. And they arrayed him in fine linen from Egypt, and silk from Byzantium, as befits a Pope; and his cope was of beaten gold, even gold beaten to the thinness of a leaf, wrought all over with the history of our Lord and His Apostles, with a border of lambs and lilies, a lamb and a lily all the way turn about. And his stole was likewise of gold, gold plates cunningly riveted, and it was set all round with precious stones, emeralds, and opals, and beryls and sardonyxes, and the stone called *Melitta*, all perfectly round and the size of a pigeon's egg; and two goodly graven stones of the ancients, one showing a chariot-race and the other the effigy of the Emperor Galba, most cunningly cut in relief. And his mitre also was of riveted gold, and inside it was fastened the lance-head of Longinus, which touched the flesh of our Lord; and on the outside it was bordered with pearls, and in its midst was a sapphire the size of a swan's egg, worked marvellously into a cup, which was the cup that the Angel brought to our Lord. And when they had arrayed Pope Jacynth in this apparel, they placed him in his chair, which was of cedar-wood covered with plates of gold, and they bore him, eight bearers, namely, three counts, three marquises, a duke and the Exarch of the Pentapolis, on their

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shoulders; and the cushions of his chair were of silk. And over him they bore a canopy embroidered most marvellously with the signs of the Zodiac by the Matrons of Amalfi. And before him went two carrying fans of the feathers of the white peacock, and two bearing censers filled with burning ambergris, and six blowing on clarions of silver. And in this manner was he enthroned above the place where rests the body of the Apostle, behind the ambones of onion stone, and the railing of alabaster open-work showing peacocks and vine leaves, and under the dome where our Lord sits in judgment on a ground of purple and seagreen and gold, and the holy lambs pasture on green enamel, each with a palm-tree by his side, and the great gold vine rises on a ground of turquoise blue. And on either side of the throne was a column of precious marble taken from a temple of the heathen, even a column of red porphyry from the temple of Mars, and a column of alabaster cunningly fluted, from the temple of Apollo. And the bells in the belfry, which is set with discs of serpentine and platters from Majorca, began to ring, and the trumpets to sound, and all the people sang the psalm *Magnificat*. And the heart of Pope Jacynth, formerly called Odo, was filled with joy and pride, because in the midst of his glory he knew himself to be more humble than the lepers outside the city gate. And the people prostrated themselves before Pope Jacynth, and prayed for his blessing.

And Pope Jacynth slept on the rushes in his chamber, and drank only water from the well and ate only salad, and beneath his robe he wore a shirt of camel's hair, mighty rough to the body. And he gloried in his humbleness. And he took of the money of the jubilee year, which twenty priests raked with silver rakes where the pilgrims passed the bridge by the Emperor Adrian's tomb, and would have none of it himself, but distributed half

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to the poor and the widows and orphans, and with the other he caused stonemasons to quarry for marble among the temples of the heathen, and draw thence the columns having flutings and sculptured capitals to set up in the nave, and to saw into slabs the pillars of porphyry and serpentine and Egyptian marble, for wainscoting and flooring. And in this fashion he did build the basilica by the Ostian gate. And he dedicated it to St. John and St. Paul, slaves and servants of Flavia, the sister of the Emperor Domitian, meaning to show thereby that in the love of God the lowest are highest; for he gloried in his humbleness. And they brought him blind men, and those with grievous sores, and lepers, to bless, that they might recover. And Pope Jacynth blessed them, and washed their sores and embraced them; and Pope Jacynth gloried in his humility.

Now when Satan saw this, he laughed; and the sound of his laughter was as a rushing wind, that burns the shoots of the wheat (for it was spring), and nipped the blossom of the almond-tree and plum-tree, causing it to fall in great profusion, as every man could testify. And Satan went before the Lord and said: "Behold, O Lord, I have won my wager. For the man Jacynth, once Odo, has sinned against Thee, even the sin of vaingloriousness; so do Thou give him to me, body and soul." And the Lord answered: "Take thou the man Jacynth, formerly Odo, his body and his soul, and do therewith whatsoever thou please, for he has sinned the sin of vaingloriousness; but for Myself I reserve that which remaineth."

So Satan departed. And he took the body of Pope Jacynth, and touched it with invisible fingers; and lo, it did gradually turn into stone; and he took the soul of Pope Jacynth, and blew on it, and behold, it shrank slowly and hardened, and became a stone, even a diamond, which, as all know, burns for ever.

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Now the people and the pilgrims were so amazed at the humility of Pope Jacynth, that they clamoured to see him ; and they attacked the gate of the palace over against the Church of St. Peter, the gate which has a gable, and in it our Lord clad in white, on a ground of gold, with a purple halo round his head, all done in mosaic by the Grecians. So the priests and the barons were afraid of the violence of the people and particularly of the pilgrims from the north, and they promised to bring Pope Jacynth for them to worship. And they dressed him in his vestments of beaten and riveted gold, set with precious stones and graven stones, and placed him on his throne of cedar-wood, and the eight bearers, three counts, two marquises, two dukes, and the Exarch of the Pentapolis, raised him on their shoulders and bore him through the square, with the censer-bearers before and the trumpeters and the fans of white peacock. And the people fell on their knees. Only there stood up one, who afterwards vanished, and was the Apostle Peter, and he cried, " Behold, Pope Jacynth has turned into an idol, even an idol of the heathen." But when the people had dispersed, and the procession had entered the church, the throne-bearers knelt down, and the throne was lowered, and behold, Pope Jacynth was dead.

But when the embalmers and the physicians took the body after three days that it had lain in state, surrounded by tapers, with lamps hung all round, under the mosaic of the dome, they found that it was uncorrupted, and had turned into marble, even marble of Paros, like the idols of the ancient Grecians. And they wondered greatly. And the learned men disputed, and decided that Pope Jacynth, formerly called Odo, must have been a wizard, for this certainly was devilry. So they caused his body to be taken and burned into lime, which, being turned to the finest marble, it readily did. Only, when they came to

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remove the lime, they found in the midst of it a burning diamond, that instantly vanished, nor was any man in time to seize it. And likewise a thing of the consistency of a dead leaf, and smelling wonderfully of violets, but it was shaped in the image of a heart. And it also vanished, nor was any man quick enough to seize it.

Now when he came down from the palace, hard by the pine cone of the Emperor Adrian, Satan did meet an angel of the Lord, even Gabriel, who was entering, wrapped round in wings of golden green. And Satan said, "Hail! brother, whither goest thou? for there remaineth of the man Jacynth, called formerly Odo, only a little lime, which was his body, and this stone that burneth eternally, which was his soul." And Satan laughed. But the angel answered, "Laugh not, most foolish fellow-servant of the Lord! For I go to seek of the man Odo, sometime called Pope Jacynth, only the heart, which the Lord has reserved for Himself for all eternity, because it was full of love and hope in His mercy." Now as Gabriel passed by, behold! a pomegranate tree along the wall, which had dried up and died in the frost ten years before, sprouted and put forth buds.

The Lady and Death

A companion-piece to Dürer's print.

I

"Since the portrait of my ancestress Agnes seems to have struck you," said Dr. Konrad Weber, "and since, even more, you seem to feel that our little town is still warm and living with the Past, I think I will tell you a very curious legend existing in our family: and of which Agnes Weberin, whom we call, after the Latin distich on her picture, Agnes Alkestis, is the heroine. But, before beginning, I had better show you the effigy of the other chief persons in this story."

He had been taking me the round, along the wooden causeway still intact, of the towers and gatehouses which give that little town of Erlach, high above its narrow valley, the air of a great city, say, Jerusalem, in one of Dürer's backgrounds. And we were walking now in the wide principal street, the Herrengasse, planted with sweet-smelling lime-trees and set with big gabled houses, all with trim flowers behind their window gratings. The street is closed not by any buildings, nor even by the city walls, but by a glimpse of country opposite, of steep green pasture and distant compact fir-woods. And against this view, as against a piece of blue-green tapestry, there stands a fountain surrounded by a statue. The fountain is of a pattern common in southern Germany and Switzerland, and not without a pleasant reminiscence of the original village drinking-trough of rough hewn fir-trunks: an octagonal basin, like a tub, and, rising in its middle, a pillar, with iron spouts spurting four thin rills of water.

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But on the top of the pillar is a statue: a knight in armour leaning on his lance.

"The fountain," said the Doctor, "was restored, as the inscription tells us, by Berchthold Weber in 1545; the husband of Agnes surnamed *Alkestis*. But the statue is, as you see, considerably earlier, and belongs to that interesting and insufficiently known school of Franconian stonemasons, who have left so many fine effigies of knights in our churches. It represents not St. George (you see the dragon is missing) but St. Theodulus, a holy warrior whom you have probably never heard of."

"Do you know," I answered, "it happens, by one of those coincidences which are perpetually surprising us, that I *have* heard of St. Theodulus, and not a month ago; and that, now you remind me of him, I am extremely interested in his legend?"

"His legend? Why, that was what I intended, so to speak, telling you," replied the Doctor. "Pray tell me, first, how much you already know about St. Theodulus."

"Has this to do with Agnes Alkestis?" I asked, for I did not want to lose her story.

"It has everything to do with her. I can tell you what St. Theodulus is reported to have done here at Erlach. But you shall tell me what he did elsewhere; for we are badly off for saints' biographies in this Lutheran town."

"Well," I replied, "I can tell you only this much, that a few weeks ago, as I was taking a walk in one of the Tyrolese valleys, not far from the source of the Isar, I found, near some remote cottages, in a runnel of snow-water spurting across the path, one of those little water-wheels which the children make in those parts of the world. Only in this case the toy consisted not of a hammer merely hammering on an empty preserve can, but of two little wooden dolls, who, as the water turned the wheel, thumped unceasingly upon each other. The thing rather

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fascinated me; and on closer examination I found that one of the figures had horns, while the other, with a sort of helmet carved on to its head, was brandishing a wooden cross. A little girl came out of one of the chalets, and seeing me in contemplation of the toy, told me her big brother had made it, and that it represented St. Theodulus fighting with the Devil. That was all the information to be extracted on the subject. But I often think of the two wooden mannikins in the brook, and wonder how long they will go on hammering, without a pause, on each other, through fine weather and snowstorm."

I was looking at the fountain while speaking, and for a moment the dark-green Alpine valley, its white glacier stream and meadows painted blue with crows-bill, rose up in my mind and made a background, instead of that mediæval street, for the statue of the saint. The weather had given him the look of being made of rusty iron; and on his hip swung a real iron sword, and an iron pennon creaked like a weather-vane from his lance. He reminded me of the metal knights at Innsbruck round Maximilian's tomb, but less barbaric and finer. The armour was rendered with every detail of strap and buckle; but the beardless face, surrounded by a nest or nimbus of wiry hair, was of archaic rigidity. Yet, doll-like though it was, it had an odd amount of expression—a tense, worn, pathetic resoluteness.

"What you say interests me very much," answered the Doctor, his eye following mine along the fountain, "and I am rather struck by what you say about the saint and the devil going on thumping one another day and night for ever and ever. That is the characteristic of all mythology: the saints, or gods, or whatever they are, never leave off from their especial act, however unnoticed, in the imagination of the people. It must have been the case with St. Theodulus. And the question arises, was the legend

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which you met in that Catholic Tyrolese valley an outcome of the story which purports really to have taken place in Protestant times in this Lutheran town of Erlach, but arranged to suit the requirements of Catholicism; or was our Erlach story merely an adaptation, connected with real dates and persons, of an old Catholic legend which Protestantism could not destroy?" I felt bound to protest, "Upon my word," I said, "you are too much of a German, dear Dr. Weber. Here am I waiting to be told the story of one of your own ancestors; and instead of telling it me, you launch out into scientific speculations about its mythological aspect!"

The Doctor smiled. "Perhaps you are right," he answered, "and I will do my best to tell you the story like a real story—the more so, that I believe it is a true one. Well, to begin . . . but first let me draw your attention to the carvings on the base of the column and on the slabs of the fountain; they have to do with the business."

I had noticed them already. Like the rest of the fountain, they were imitation Italian of the sixteenth century. They represented cupids, but cupids holding trophies of death's heads and cross bones.

"When you have told me the story," I said, "I shall ask you to give the rein to your scientific instincts, and to tell me the reason why, throughout all your German art of the Renaissance, from Dürer and Holbein to the smallest *Little Master*, there is always Death skulking round the corner?"

"Ah, you have noticed that," replied Dr. Weber, "the skeleton grinning behind the door, or looking down from the tree, or putting his hand in the pedlar's pack, or waving his hourglass at the lady and her gallant; everywhere Death, *Herr Tod*, as he is called in the ballad I shall tell you part of. My story bears precisely on that point. By

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the way, can you see in your mind's-eye Dürers print of *The Knight and Death* ? ”

II

“ My ancestor Berchthold,” began Dr. Weber, as we sat after early dinner in the little steep garden behind his ancestral house, “ was the most remarkable physician of a family in which, as you know, we have practised medicine from father to son for four hundred years. And I think I may say, judging by contemporary accounts and his books and manuscripts, one of the most remarkable philosophers of his day, the forerunner of the chemists and anatomists of the seventeenth century. He had been born in 1480 of Konrad Weber and Barbara Perlacherin; and returned to his native town of Erlach about 1525, after years of study and travel in Italy and the East; returned not without a pretty bad reputation, already, for illicit knowledge. You must not imagine that Erlach, even in its greatest days, was a busy trading or manufacturing town like Nürnberg or Basel; it took its political importance from being on the cross roads from North Germany to Switzerland, and from Frankfort to Italy; but it was then, as now, an agricultural centre, and our forebears, burghers or knights, were merely the farmers of the neighbouring fertile districts, able to store forage and grain on their impregnable hillside, and thus to victual or to starve contending potentates. Such being the case, they were not accustomed to science and philosophy; and the fact of their having followed the Lutheran movement had merely given them a narrow-minded pietism. So that Berchthold Weber, a Catholic, but of the slack pattern of the wicked Italians, a friend of Erasmus, a hanger-on of godless worldly prelates, a philosopher, and a man who openly declared that diseases were not sent by Heaven, Dr. Berchthold, I say, was not looked on with favour.

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And the rumour of the strange laboratory he fitted up in his house, of the queer animals he kept, the bones and skeletons he collected (and they said even bought at the gallows on the town Ravenstone), did not improve his reputation. So that, although he was not openly molested, people fought shy of him, and the celebrated Dr. Stumpfius, in a sermon in the Wolfgangs Kirche, even went the length of blaming his eminent fellow-citizen, Councillor Heinrich Stoss, for giving his daughter Agnes in marriage to what he called a noted follower of Epicurus. This Agnes—the little maid Agnes of the Stosses—was the one whose portrait you have seen, with the Latin distich comparing her to Alkestis; and I suspect that the choice of the elderly and not very well-famed Doctor Berchthold was an only child's wilful decision, reluctantly given in to by her doting father. But for all the preacher's insinuations, it was impossible for the burghers of Erlach to fall upon or exile so quiet and harmless a person as my learned ancestor, or one so often visited and sent for by the greatest princes. Moreover, it was certain that when the plague came to Franconia in 1525, and decimated all the neighbouring towns and villages, the city of Erlach was wonderfully little visited by the scourge, and many of those sick of plague were saved, owing ostensibly, at least, to the precautions taught the citizens by Berchthold Weber, and the new-fangled remedies which he applied. But, of course, although this debt of gratitude made it impossible to molest the doctor's person, the sense of it only increased the existing badness of his reputation. For it began to be whispered at every fountain and washing-trough, and hinted more openly in every wine-cellar frequented by the theologians and the more zealous burghers, that if Berchthold Weber had succeeded in stemming the tide of the plague, and saving his countrymen's lives, this was owing not really to his nefarious learning, but to

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a compact he had made with the Prince of Terrors in person; promising his own life in return for those of his fellow-citizens, out of sinful curiosity and carnal vain-gloriousness. Just the sort of disgraceful rubbish which our forefathers were always bandying about? I quite agree. But was the accusation false? There, my dear friend, I confess I do not feel so sure. People's contemporaries often accuse them of things they haven't done; but not so often of things which they themselves don't think quite possible in others. Among all the thousand witches who were burnt in Germany—(a fair proportion in our town of Erlach, and the papers of the trials still exist)—I don't suppose there were ten who didn't believe in witchcraft; and a large proportion had been to the Brocken sabbath, or thought they had. Apply this to the case of Dr. Berchthold Weber. Nonsense! you will exclaim—a learned man, a physician, a discoverer, who forestalled Leuwenhoeek and Haller!

“But in those days of Paracelsus and Cardan, one could be all that much, and yet believe in things which every modern school-child laughs at. For science consists merely in fitting a few facts which we discover or guess at, into a scheme given ready-made by tradition and by fancy; and this scheme varies perpetually. Ours, to-day, is full of unintelligible things called Laws, Forces, and so forth; *theirs*, in the days of Berchthold Weber, had other paraphernalia, more picturesque, and perhaps, after all, as reasonable. Essences, virtues, almost human in shape, spirits like those invoked by Faust, and drawn by Dürer in his Melancholia, bogies like the ones of Wohlgemuth and Kranach. Let us suppose that our ingenious and learned contemporary Dr. Weissmann had been brought up to think of Heredity, Evolution, etc., etc., not as ‘Laws,’ but as real Entities, sorting the world's affairs from thrones up in the Empyrean.—Supposing Dr. Weiss-

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mann to think this, would he not be acting like a genuine man of science, if he took the necessary steps to meet, let us say, the Lady Panmixia, attired like a muse or sibyl, with attributes and fluttering ribbons, and ask her, face to face, the true history of her relations with the Spirit of Natural Selection, her honoured parent? You laugh! You laugh because, allow me to say so, you are a mere writer, and believe in science with a big *S* as something infallible and unchanging. We, men of science, are more humble, and therefore, more appreciative of our fore-runners, and know that we should have thought exactly as they did. Dr. Weissmann, had he lived in the sixteenth century, would have acted—well, like my ancestor Berchtold; and my ancestor Berchtold acted like a genuine man of science when, thirsting to know the secrets of Death, he applied for information at head-quarters—went to learn the how and why of disease and dissolution from Herr Tod himself.

“Learn from Death himself! You think perhaps that is a metaphor? It is a very fine one, and, like the finest metaphors, it is fine because it is literal. *Learn from Death*: not merely by standing by the bed of dying people and cutting up their bodies when once dead. No, my dear friend! But by going down to the *Todestal*, to *Death's Valley*, and making a tryst, a compact, with the Skeleton Herr in person, as the burgesses and theologians of Erlach, on the evidence of a certain woodcutter, asserted Berchtold Weber to have done at the time of the Black Death. . . .”

III

“I believe he did it,” continued Dr. Weber, as we were walking up and down the narrow garden closed on all sides by gabled burghers' houses, by high-roofed barns smelling deliciously of hay and cattle, and where, on the

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open side, framed by great walnut-trees, the valley slanted sheer, with another piece of old city, walls and towers, across it, "I believe he did it, because—well, because I believe *she did it*. But come and see her once more."

Her portrait was hanging on the wide wooden staircase, which led up out of the big entrance hall where the swallows nested above the Doctor's dogcart and the children's latest withered Christmas-tree, surrounded by the portraits of bearded worthies in ruffs, and wigged worthies in bands, surrounded also by quaint mottoes in praise of God, of wine and of song, painted in red Gothic letters along the walls.

The portrait was by some humble imitator of Holbein; and, poor though it was, it had a research of rigid, delicate line, and pale and pure distinction of feature unmarred by shadows, which suited the lady's person and history. She had the beauty so rare among the women which that school painted, but which, when it exists, no other school renders like that one. A beauty of extreme rareness, eminently exceptional; and, with its thin and perfect features and noble bearing, more than patrician, queenly. She was represented in a stiff bodice grown black with time, and just faintly showing a mixture of gold thread and gold loops; the pale hair hardly visible under the big, white, wing-like cap; a flower, something of the kind of the hyacinth, in the long thin hand. She was no longer young, yet you could hardly say she was old: emaciated not by years but by some tragedy inherent in her noble brows and delicate, loving mouth and great eyes looking from deep vaulted sockets far into the world—a world of mystery and pity.

"Is your ancestress—*Frau Agnes Weber, daughter of Heinrich Stoss and wife to Berchthold Weber*—is your ancestress really all she strikes me?" I asked the Doctor, "or has my fancy already taken the cue from the thing

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you have hinted at, and from that Latin distich comparing her *for piety and fortitude to the Queen of Greek Admetos whom the poets write of* ? She certainly looks as if she might be some mediæval Alkestis, years after her stay in the kingdom of Hades, but with 'he remembrance of it always in her eyes."

"Agnes Alkestis—that is just it," answered the doctor, reverently. "Well, yes, I believe she did it. . . . Historically," he went on, as we still stood on that landing, "we know little about her. She came of a very old burgher family, the only child of Heinrich Stoss, who was town-councillor, and died a burgomaster of this town. There is an allusion to her, as I told you, in one of the famous Stumpfius's letters, blaming Heinrich Stoss for giving *his little maiden, only eighteen years old*, to Berchthold W. . . —a Catholic, though a "noted follower of the atheist Epicurus"—a man who under cover of medicine cultivates vain practices and impious notions, teaching that health and sickness are in man's hands, not God's ! Moreover, as Dr. Stumpfius, who perhaps had his own eye on this young heiress, tells us, a man no longer young, twenty years older than his bride, and taking advantage of the waywardness of a spoilt child's fancy and the ungodly weakness of a widowed father—a sort of Desdemona story, one might imagine the little maid Agnes falling in love with the learned elderly Doctor for the sake of his wondrous learning, his strange accounts of travel and discovery and his devotion to the poor sick folk. Be this as it may, we know that they were married in 1530, and came three years later to settle in this house, where Berchthold died in January, 1565, and Agnes eleven months later. Agnes bore Dr. Berchthold three children : Wernher, Barbara, and Ulrich, from which last we are descended. These three children all survived their parents ; I want you to mark this fact, for it shows that

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Agnes Alkestis was saved one possible tragedy in her life. Neither does it appear from Berchthold's carefully-kept family records that any of these children was ever dangerously ill; and as we find them all married early and safely established as prosperous citizens, we may conclude that they did not give their parents unnecessary trouble by their conduct. On the other hand, neither the family records nor the city archives mention any loss of fortune or danger from fire as was then so common, or destruction of property in warfare; so that on this score also Agnes Weberin was unusually fortunate. What circumstances, therefore, could have given rise to that comparison of the Doctor's wife with Alkestis; what calamity could have left that look upon her face, in which, as you at once felt, there is the record of some great tragedy?

"Besides that Latin distich and the ballad I shall read to you later, only one indication still remains, and that is even more mysterious. Here it is."

Doctor Weber had taken me downstairs again, and entered the long narrow room which was his study, as it had been, three hundred and fifty years ago, the study of his ancestor Berchthold. He took from a shelf a great Latin Bible, printed at Mainz in the fifteenth century, and turned to the manuscript leaves of the back.

"Here," he said, "are Berchthold Weber's family records put down year by year with laconic accuracy. See? '1531, February 3, our little son Ulrich is born. March 18th, my dear wife Agnes goes to church the first time since childbirth, deep snow on the ground, but nothing to repine at, Laus Deo.

"'July 1539. Our little daughter Barbara has measles, but of a benign form, and happily recovers. Laus Deo. Then, October 1544, my wife Agnes and I decide upon restoring the fountain, much out of repair, of St. Theodulus from devotion to that saint, and ordering a

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painted window for our chapel in the Ulrich's church, showing the saint in question, and ourselves kneeling in thanksgiving to God.' Thanksgiving for what? For general prosperity and immunity from many evils? I scarcely think so. For immediately before this comes an enigmatic entry—try and spell it out—I fancy the hand-writing is very unsteady.

“‘ August 1544. This month it has pleased the Highest to search the heart and mind of Agnes my wife and myself, trying us both by different and unheard-of trials; and Agnes my wife especially as no woman of our times has ever been tried; wherefore let us bear for ever a humble, contrite, and loving heart in *dulci magno júbilo*.’

“That,” said Dr. Weber, after replacing the sheet of tissue paper over the faded minute writing, and putting the book back upon its shelf, “is the third of the only three remaining genuine records—the fountain of St. Theodulus (for the painted window was destroyed when Erlach was sacked by Wallenstein), this entry of Dr. Berchthold's, the portrait of Agnes Alkestis. They none of them tell us the meaning of each other or their own; and none explain in the least why Agnes Weberin should have been compared to the Greek Queen who went down to the kingdom of Death to save the life of her husband Admetos.”

Mechanically Dr. Weber had pushed open the study window, and we were in the garden once more, where the scent from the barns and the smell of the lime-flowers filled the twilight.

“The explanation,” he continued, “is given by the legend, as we were all of us taught it as children; as, for the rest, every child in Erlach knows it; and as, until these cultured days, you could buy it in rough ballad form and printed on cartridge paper at every fair in Franconia. And that ballad is the story of Alkestis; Alkestis, the wife

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of Admetos, King of Pheræ, became Alkestis, wife of Berchthold Weber, physician of Erlach."

And Dr. Weber, walking up and down among the roses and stocks of his garden, the syringas and tall scarlet runners, suddenly stopped, and looked full at me through his round spectacles.

"Agnes Stoss," he went on, after a minute, "a beautiful imaginative, and self-willed girl, who married the man whom she had made her ideal; and she has learned that the reality is more interesting, fuller and better, even than the ideal; realising in detail the life of devotion to truth, of tenderness to suffering, of her husband. And Berchthold, to whom the undreamed-of happiness has come just at the age when happiness begins no longer to be expected, expands, grows young and human in her love. Then there are the children. Well! after some time of this Agnes begins to notice a change come over her husband—a pervading, inscrutable sadness. He is, if anything, more restlessly active than before, spending days and nights in his laboratory; and he is, if possible, even more loving. But in his activity and in his love there is something frightening. She feels in it the hurry, the effort, the passionate desire to consummate and to clutch, of one who knows his days are numbered. But he will make no answer to her inquiries and denies any change in himself. Is he ill? Has he recognised in himself the germ of some fatal disease? That is how we moderns understand the situation: the learned man is able to calculate, perhaps to a month, the moment when his heart will wear out, or his brain give way; he has spent his life too freely while it belonged only to himself and to science. That is not the mediæval notion, the notion of Agnes Alkestis, who, unable to penetrate her husband's secret, seeks, even like the Queen of Admetos, for heavenly aid. The ballad tells us that she prays to St. Theodulus, patron of those who suffer

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from cruel apprehension, and implores him to explain the riddle. And in a vision the riddle is explained: in the days of his loneliness Dr. Berchthold had promised to give himself over, on a fixed date, to King Death, in return for the secret of prolonging the life of the plague-stricken. And the date has approached. You remember Admetos in Euripides? Berchthold Weber is more of a king than he. Instead of bemoaning his fate, seeking a victim to replace him, he has kept his counsel and keeps it. Agnes never for a moment dreams of offering to die in his stead. The whole tragedy takes place unspoken. He, knowing his doom, thinks only how to hide the fearful fact to the last, how to make it fall as gently as possible on his wife. She, decided at once to give her useless woman's life for the life of the man who can comfort and save so many others, lays her plans also in silence. It is the secret agony of these two souls, unable to seek for comfort in one another, which constitutes that unheard-of trial to which the entry in the family Bible is an allusion; and it is these days of unspoken reciprocal farewell, which have left their trace, methinks, far more than the hours spent in Death's Valley, in Agnes Weberin; making her Agnes Alkestis.

"It is strange to think," added Doctor Weber musingly, looking up at the steep gable of his ancestral house, at the white-washed beamed wall festooned with vine "that it all took place here, within these walls, and sometimes I catch myself feeling as if I were seated in the castle of Lear, or Elsinore; or, in fact, the palace of Pheræ where Herakles was a guest, and Apollo...."

Evening had come on; the upper sky, with swallows crossing and re-crossing it, was turning greenish; the slopes and firwoods far off were veiling themselves as in thin crape; and the high-pitched roof, the towers and gable-houses of the projecting part of Erlach were pro-

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filed above the ravine, like the twilit town in Dürer's print of St. Anthony.

IV

"*Todestal*, the Valley of Death—that also sounds merely an appropriate metaphor," said Dr. Weber, as he took me a country walk the next morning—"well, it is not. It is a concrete reality. The Valley of Death lies north-east of Erlach, its opening where the Brook of Death—*Todesbach*—runs into the Erl, just a mile outside the Bamberg Gate. I can show it you all on the Ordnance map. And what is more, you are at present standing in the middle of it."

He had led me across the high-lying cornfields and the thick fir-woods, and then by a scrambling track along the rocks, suddenly into a narrow valley.

It was a corridor cut as with a knife out of the surrounding table-land, its steep walls of soft yellow stone, fringed at the top with trees and bushes, and barely wider than the shallow stream which stagnated in pools among its stones. In the rest of the world it was a sunny, breezy day, the green crops rustling like watered silk; but here, there penetrated neither a ray of sun nor a breath of wind; and the great hemlocks stood motionless amongst the oozy green stones of the sluggish silent stream. After a few yards the corridor widened into a kind of circular chamber; its floor of thick wet grass, its side more perpendicular still, with hardy little spruce firs and stunted pines striking their wedge-shaped roots into its top, and among them, high up like a hermitage in a Dürer print, was a tiny chapel with wooden extinguisher roof.

Dr. Weber sat down on the trunk of the old fir, which must have fallen ages ago, over the wall of the valley.

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"The little chapel you see," he said, "was served until the Reformation by a solitary friar, and to this fact we owe the knowledge that already in the early middle ages this valley took its name from Death. There seems no reason why. The Bamberg Road, indeed, which leads to near its mouth, passes alongside of the Ravenstone, the place of the permanent gallows and the wheel, from which the ghosts of malefactors used to descend, even in my great-grandfather's time, and frightened belated travellers. But that is nearly a mile away, and could not account for the name of this valley. Perhaps, indeed, the name is merely a corruption of some word of wholly different meaning, but which changed in this way from a certain appropriate quality. Be this as it may, the Valley of Death, and more particularly this winding of it where we are seated, is the place of the last act of the story of Agnes Alkestis. I told you of the old ballad we used to buy at fairs. Listen to the beginning of it. 'It happened on a Sunday in the pleasant month of August, since our Lord Jesus's Incarnation for our sins, one thousand years five hundred and forty-four. The good folk of Erlach, with all the town guard with their pikes and crossbows, and all the guilds with banners, many thousand men and women and children, all who could walk, or ride, or crawl, went forth outside the city walls to look down on the jousting in a certain valley. For you must know that in that place a Trusty Knight was going to challenge Death in person, and force him to restore Frau Agnes, Berchthold Weber's wife, who was willing to die in her husband's stead. And the town-crier has summoned the good folk of Erlach from the tower top; and they have gone outside the town, men, women, and children, many thousands, all who could walk, or ride, or crawl, to look down at the jousting in the Todestal.'"

"That is how the ballad begins," went on Dr. Weber.

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"Then the Trusty Knight bids the herald blow his trumpet; and three times the herald blows, and three times calls on Death by name, 'Herr Tod—Herr Tod—Herr Tod,' and summons him to give back Frau Agnes or meet the Trusty Knight in single combat. The third time the herald also throws down the Trusty Knight's glove. Then Herr Tod appears, riding down the valley on a thin, pale horse; he has on a helmet wreathed with straw, and a gallant black sash embroidered with gold, but with no armour or other garments, for, says the ballad, he had on him no flesh to hurt and in him had he no blood that could be spilt. The ballad does not mention it, but I imagine my poor ancestress kneeling close by, like the poor Princess in the pictures of St. George. They spurred their horses on each other, and closed with a hideous shock—the lance of Herr Tod had struck in the pommel of the Trusty Knight, and very nearly thrown him off his horse. the Trusty Knight wheeled round his red roan horse and rushed upon his adversary; but alas! his lance merely shivered against the iron ribs of Herr Tod's pale horse and fell on the Knight in splinters. But again the Trusty Knight wheeled round, letting go the reins on the neck of his red roan, and grasping his great sword with both hands. And as he came up with Herr Tod, who had also drawn, he let the great sword crash down on Herr Tod, and the skeleton, with dreadful screams as of vultures and a rattle of bones such as never was heard, fell backwards to the ground. Then the Trusty Knight took Frau Agnes behind him on his red roan horse and carried her back to Erlach, all the inhabitants following and the bells all ringing greeting, to where stood Berchthold Weber, with his three young children weeping on their doorstep.

"That is the end of the ballad," said Dr. Weber, after a pause, rising from the tree trunk and preceding me along the narrow path and across the oozy stream—"but

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there are two versions of it, which differ in one important particular. The more recent version, written down when Erlach had turned completely Protestant and was smarting from its cruel treatment by Wallenstein, says that the Trusty Knight was one Dietrich von Kreglingen, whom the father of Agnes had hidden in his house during the persecution of the independent nobles by Kaiser Maximilian. But the earlier version of the ballad, dating from a time when Lutherans and Catholics still lived peaceably together in our town, and were not very clearly distinguishable, tells us that the Trusty Knight was no other than Theodulus, the heavenly patron of the Webers, and who had descended from his fountain to defend them. It seems rather difficult to decide at this distance of time, and I think you may safely choose whichever of the two champions you prefer."

At a sudden bend we had come to the mouth of the narrow valley, and in front of us, where its perpendicular sides and fringe of birches and firs ended, there rose, high up against the sunny sky, the distant walls, the towers, and high-pitched roofs of Erlach.

"As regards myself," said Dr. Weber meditatively, "as I have learned from comparative mythology that nothing is more usual than to be two totally different persons at the same time, I am willing to accept both Dietrich von Kreglingen and St. Theodulus as the Herakles who released from the bonds of Death my ancestress Alkestis."

St. Eudaemon and his Orange-Tree

Here is the story of St. Eudæmon's Orange-Tree. It is not among the *Lives of the Blessed Fathers*, by Brother Dominick Cavalca of Vico Pisano, still less in the *Golden Legend* compiled by James of Voragine; nor, very likely, in any other work of hagiography. I learned it on the spot of the miracle, and in the presence of its ever-blossoming witness, the orange-tree. The orchards of the Cælian and the Aventine spread all round, with their criss-cross of reeds carrying young vines, and you see on all sides great arches and vague ruins: Colosseum, Circus Maximus, House of Nero, and the rest; with, far beyond, modern Rome, St. Peter's dome and the blue Sabine Mountains. There is a little church—one of a dozen like it—with chipped Ionic columns, and a tessellated pavement lilac and russet like a worn-out precious rug, and a great cactus, like a python, winding round the apse. The orange-tree stands there, shedding its petals over vines and salads, immense and incredibly venerable; what seems the trunk, in reality merely the one surviving branch, the real trunk being hidden deep below the level of the garden. Here did I learn the legend; but from whom, and how, I must leave you to guess. Suffice that it be true.

Long, long ago, before the church was built, which has stood, however, over twelve hundred years, there settled on the Cælian slopes a certain saint, by name Eudæmon. The old Pagan Rome was buried under ground, great boulders and groups of columns only protruding; and the new Christian Rome was being built far off, of stones and brick quarried and carted from the ruins. Weeds and bushes, ~~and~~ great ilexes and elms, had grown up above

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the former city, and it was haunted of demons. Men never came near it, save to quarry for stone or seek for treasure with dreadful incantation; and it became a wilderness, surrounded, at uneven distances, by the long walls, and the storied square belfries of many monasteries.

The place to which this Eudæmon came—and no one can tell whence he came, nor anything of him save that he had a bride, who died the eve of their wedding—the place to which Eudæmon came was in the heart of the ruins and the wilderness, very far from the abode of men; and indeed he had but two neighbouring saints like himself, a theologian who inhabited a ruined bath to avoid the noise of bell-ringing; and a stylite, who had contrived a platform of planks roofed over with reeds on the top of the column of the Emperor Philip.

Eudæmon, as above stated, was a saint; persons who did not molest their neighbours were mostly saints in those days; and so, of course, he could work miracles. Only, his miracles in the opinion of other saints, particularly of the Theologian and the Stylite (whose names were Carpophorus and Ursicinus), were nothing very special, in fact, just barely within the limits of the miraculous. Eudæmon had planted a garden round about the ruins of the circular temple of Venus, and vines and lettuces, roses and peaches had replaced within a very few years the scrub of ilex and myrtle, and the mad vegetation of wild fennel and oats and wallflower which matted over the masonry, and this, of course, since he was a saint, must be a miracle. He had cleared out, also, the innermost cell of the temple, and turned it into a chapel, with a fair carved tomb of the pagans for an altar, and pictures of the Blessed Virgin and the Saviour, with big eyes and purple clothes, painted on the whitewash. And he had erected alongside a belfry, three stories high, circular and open with pillars quarried from the temple, and stuck

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about with discs of porphyry (out of the temple floor), and green Cretan bowls for ornament; which, of course, was also a miracle. Moreover, at the end of the orchard he had erected wattled huts for poor folk, to whom he taught gardening and other useful arts; also sheds for cows and goats, and a pigeon-cot; and he had constructed out of osier a cart, and broken in a donkey's foal, in order to send his vegetables to distribute in Rome to the indigent, together with cans of milk and rounds of goats' cheese. And to the wives of the poor whom he lodged he taught how to weave and cure skins, and to the children he taught the abacus and the singing of hymns. And for the poor folk he made, near their wattled huts, a bowling-green, and instructed them to play at that game. And indeed the matter of the orange-tree arose out of the making of the bowling-green; all of which were plainly miracles. Meanwhile Eudæmon lived all alone in a shed closed with reeds, and roofed by one of the vaultings of that temple of the Pagans; and he was a laborious man, and abstemious, and possessed a knowledge of medicine, and was able, though but little, to read in the Scriptures; and Eudæmon was a saint, though but a small one.

But Carpophorus the theologian, and Ursicinus the stylite, did not think much of Eudæmon and his saintlings, nay, each thought even less of him than of the other. For Carpophorus, who had translated the books of Deuteronomy from the Hebrew, and the gospels of Nicodemus and of Enoch into Latin, and written six treatises against the Gnostics and Paulicians, and a book on the marriage of the Sons of God; and who, moreover, had a servant to wash his clothes and dust his rolls of manuscript, and cook his dinner, thought Ursicinus both ignorant and rustic, living untidily on that platform on the column, as shaggy and black as a bear, and constantly fixing his eyes on his own navel; while Ursicinus the

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stylite, who had not changed his tunic or touched cooked food for five years, and had frequently risen to the contemplation of the One, looked down upon the pendency and luxurious habits of Carpophorus, and esteemed him a man of fleshly vanities.

But Carpophorus and Ursicinus agreed in having a very poor opinion of Eudæmon; and often met in brotherly discourse upon the likelihood of his being given over by Heaven to the Evil One. And this opinion they made freely manifest to himself, on the occasions when he would invite them to dinner in his orchard, regaling them on fruit, milk, wine, and the honey of his bees; and whenever either came singly to borrow a wax taper, or a piece of fair linen, or a basket, or a penn'orth of nails, he made it a point to warn Eudæmon very seriously against his dangerous ways of thinking and proceeding, and to promise intercession with the Powers above.

The two saints would have liked a fine theological set to. But Eudæmon only smiled. Eudæmon was always smiling; and that was one of the worst signs about him: for a man, let alone a saint, who smiles, expresses thereby satisfaction with this world and confidence in his salvation, both of which are slights to Heaven. Moreover, Eudæmon talked in a profane manner; and there was far too much marrying and giving in marriage among the poor folk he had gathered round him. He showed unseemly interest in women in labour, even assisting them with physie, and advising them on the rearing of infants; he rarely chastised young children, and allowed the lads and maidens to tell him their love-affairs, never exhorting either to a life of abstinence and celibacy. He attended to the ailments of animals, and was frequently heard to address speech to them as if they had been possessed of an immortal soul, and as if their likings and dislikings should be considered; thus he made brooding nests for

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the doves, and placed dishes of water for the swallows, and was surrounded by birds, allowing them to perch on his shoulders and hands, and calling them by name. Various things he said might almost have led you to suspect—had such suspicion not been too uncharitable—that he considered birds and beasts as the creatures of God and brethren to man; nay, that plants also had life, and recognised the Creator; but when he came to speak of such matters, calling the sun and moon *brother* and *sister*, and attributing Christian virtues, as humility, chastity, joyousness, to water, and fire, and clouds, and winds, his discourses were such that it was more charitable to consider them as ravings, and himself as one of the half-witted; and this, indeed, Eudæmon probably was, and not utterly damned, otherwise Carpophorus could scarcely have borrowed his altar clothes and tapers, or Ursicinus accepted his lettuces and honeycomb.

The two saints were devoured by curiosity to know what might be the secret relations of their fellow-saint with the world of devils. For these delicate matters gave a saint his position; and on these it was customary to show a subtle mixture of reticence and bragging. Had Eudæmon ever had encounters with the Prince of Darkness? Had he been tempted? Had lovely ladies burst in upon his visions, or large stones been rained down through his roof? Carpophorus, feigning to speak of a third person, made some extraordinary statements concerning himself; and Ursicinus led to even more marvellous suppositions by refusal to go into details. But Eudæmon showed no interest in these discourses, neither courting nor evading them. He stated drily that he had undergone no temptations of an unusual sort, and no persecutions worth considering. As to encounters with devils, and with heathen divinities, upon which his fellow-saints insisted upon explicit answers, he had nothing to report that con-

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cerned anyone. He had, indeed, on the coast of Syria, once come across a creature who was half man, half horse, of the sort which the pagans called *Centaur*, of whom he had asked his way in the sand and grass, and who had answered with difficulty, making whinnying noises, and pawing, and cocking his ears; and some years later, among the oakwoods round the lake of Nemi, he had met a Faun, a rustic creature shaped like a man, but with goat's horns and legs, who had entertained him pleasantly in a cool brake of reeds, and given him nuts and very succulent roots for a midday meal; and it was his opinion that such creatures, although denied human speech, were aware of the goodness of God, and possessed some way of their own, however different from ours, of expressing their joy therein. Indeed, was there aught in the Scriptures which affirmed or suggested that any one of God's creatures was destitute of such sense of His loving-kindness? As regards the gods of the heathens, what manner of harm could they do to a Christian? Can false gods hurt any except their believers? Nay, Eudæmon actually seemed to hint that these Pagan divinities were deserving of compassion, and that they also, like the sun and moon, the wolves and the lambs, the grass and the trees, were God's children and our brethren, if only they knew it. . . .

Of course, however, Carpophorus and Ursiclus never allowed Eudæmon to become quite explicit on this point of doctrine, lest they should have to consider him damned beyond remission, and therefore, unfit for their society. As things stood, the two saints were comfortably persuaded that those little visits, with accompanying loans and gifts, were probably poor Eudæmon's one chance of salvation.

And now for the miracle.

It happened that in digging the ground for a fresh piece of vineyard, a spade struck upon an uncommonly

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large round stone, which being uncovered, disclosed itself to be a full-length woman, carved in marble, and embedded in the clay, face upwards. The peasants fled in terror, some crying out that they had found an embalmed Pagan, and some, a sleeping female devil. But Eudæmon merely smiled, and wiped the earth off the figure, which was exceeding comely, and mended one of its arms with cement, and set it up on a carved tombstone of the ancients, at the end of the grass walk through the orchard, and close to the beehives.

Carpophorus and Ursicinus heard the news, and hastening to the spot, instantly offered Eudæmon their help in breaking the figure to bits and conveying it to a limekiln by the Tiber. For it was evidently an image of the goddess Venus, by far the wickedest of all the devils. The two saints examined the statue with holy curiosity, and quoted, respectively, several passages of Athenagoras and Lactantius, and many anecdotes of the Hermit St. Paul, and of other anchorites of the Thebais. But Eudæmon merely thanked them very sweetly for their exhortations, and sent them away with a pair of new sandals and a flask of oil as a gift. After this, the two saints did not consider themselves free to call upon him any longer, and took no notice of the presents he continued to send. They would greatly have liked to behold that idol again, not on account of its comeliness, which neither recognised, but from intense curiosity to see devils a little closer. But having preached openly against it, and tried to stir the peasants to knock it down and break it, they were ashamed of entering the orchard; and merely sought for opportunities of looking across the narrow valley, and seeing the figure of the goddess, shining white among the criss-cross reeds and the big fig-trees of Eudæmon's vineyard.

*This being the case, judge of the joy of the two holy

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men when one June evening—and it was the vigil of the Birth of John Baptist—the news was brought that Eudæmon had at last been caught hold of by the Devil! All other considerations vanished, for brotherly charity required that they should fly to the spot and behold the catastrophe.

The two saints were rather disappointed. The Devil had not carried off Eudæmon, whom, indeed, they found peaceably watering some clove-pinks; but he had carried off, or at least appropriated, a notable piece of Eudæmon's property. For Eudæmon, of all the worldly goods he had once enjoyed, had retained one only, but that surely the most sinful, a wedding-ring. It was quite useless to his neighbours, and a token of earthly affections, having been bought by him to stick on the hand of the girl he had been about to marry. The ring had been a subject of scandal to Carpophorus and Ursicinus, the more so that Eudæmon had flown into a rage (the only time in their experience), when they suggested he should exchange it in the city against a chapel bell; and it was highly satisfactory that the Devil should have opened his campaign by seizing this object above all others.

The way it had happened was this. It being the vigil of the Birth of John Baptist, Eudæmon had, according to a habit of his, which was far from commendable, allowed his peasant folk to make merry, nay, had spread tables for them in the vineyard, and arranged games for young and old; a way of celebrating the occasion the less desirable, that it was said that the vigil of John Baptist happened to coincide with the old feast of the devil Venus, and that the rustics still celebrated it with ceremonies connected with that evil spirit, and in themselves worthy of blame, such as picking bundles of lavender for their linen lockers, making garlands of clove-pinks and lighting bonfires, all of which were countenanced by Eudæmon.

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On this occasion Eudæmon thought fit to open the bowling-green, which he had just finished building up of green sods, carefully jointed and beaten, with planks to keep the balls from straying. He was showing the rustics how to bowl their balls, and had, for this purpose, girt up his white woollen smock above his knees, when he was stung by a wasp, a creature, no doubt, of the Devil. Seeing his finger begin to swell, and unwilling to be prevented from continuing the game, he had, for the first time on record, removed that gold wedding-ring, and, after a minute's hesitation how to dispose of it, stuck it on the extended right annular finger of the marble statue of the devil Venus; and then gone on playing. But that rash action, so unworthy of a Christian saint, and in which so many blameable acts culminated—for there should have been neither ring to remove nor idol to stick it on—that altogether reprehensible action was punished as it deserved. After a few rounds of the game, Eudæmon bade the peasants fall to on the dinner he had provided for them, while he himself retired to say his prayers. So doing, he sought his ring. But—O prodigy! O terror! it was in vain. The marble she-devil had bent her finger and closed her hand. She had accepted the ring (and with it, doubtless, his wretched sinful soul) and refused to relinquish it. No sooner had a single one of the rustics found out what had happened, than the whole crew of them, men, women, and children, fled in confusion, muttering prayers and shrieking exorcisms, and carrying away what victuals they could.

It was only when Carpophorus and Ursicinus arrived, armed with missals and holy-water brushes, that a few of the boldest rustics consented to return to the scene of the wonder. They found, as I have already mentioned, Eudæmon placidly watering some pots of clove-pinks, which he had prepared as gifts for the maidens. The

St. Eudæmon and His Orange-Tree

tables were upset, the bunches of lavender lying about; the lettuces and rosebushes had been trampled. The frogs had begun to wail in the reed-brakes, and the crickets to lament in the ripe corn; bats were circling about and swallows, and the sun was sinking. The last rays fell upon the marble statue at the end of the bowling-green, making the ring glimmer on her finger; and suddenly, just as the two saints entered, reddening and gilding her nakedness into a semblance of life. Carpophorus and Ursicinus gave a yell of terror and nearly fell flat on the ground. Eudæmon looked up from his clove-pinks at them, and at the statue. He understood. "Foolish brothers," he said, "did you not know that Brother Sun can make all things alive?"

And he continued watering the flowers and going to the well to fill his can.

Carpophorus and Ursicinus had not recovered from their terror; but it was spiced with a certain delight, for were they not about to witness some dreadful proceeding on the part of the Evil One? Meanwhile, they kept at a respectful distance from the idol, and splashing holy water right and left, and swinging censers backwards and forwards, they set up a hymn in a shaky voice, not without some lapses of grammar. But the idol took notice of none of it; she shone out white in the gathering twilight, and on her bent finger, on her closed hand, twinkle the little gold circlet.

When Eudæmon had finished his watering, he let the bucket once more down into the well, and took a deep drink of water. Then he dipped his hands, ungirt his white woollen robes, the day's work being done, and walked leisurely down the bowling-green, calling the birds, who whirled round his head; but taking no notice of his fellow-saints and their exorcisms. Before the idol he stood still. He looked up, quite boldly, at her comely

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limbs and face, and even with a benign smile. "Sister Venus," he said, "you were ever a lover of jests; but every jest has its end. Night is coming on, my outdoor work is over; it is fit I should retire to prayers and to rest. Give me therefore my ring, of which I bade you take charge in return for the hospitality I had shown you."

Carpophorus and Ursicinus quickened the time of their hymn, and sang much at cross purposes, looking up at the idol with the corner of their eyes.

The statue did not move. There she stood, naked and comely, whiter and whiter as the daylight faded, and the moon rose up in the east. "Sister Venus," resumed Eudæmon, "you are not obliging. I fear, Sister Venus, that you nurture evil designs, such as mankind accounts to your blame. If this be, desist. Foolish persons have said you were wicked, nay a devil; and like enough you have got to believe it, and to glory, perhaps, in the notion. Cast it from you, Sister Venus, for I tell you it is false. And so, restore me my ring."

But still the idol did not move, but grew only whiter, like silver, in the moonbeams, as she stood above the green grass, in the smoke of the incense. Carpophorus and Ursicinus fixed their eyes on her, wondering when she would break in two pieces, and a dragon smelling of brimstone issue from her with a hideous noise, as a result of their exorcism.

"Sister Venus," Eudæmon repeated, and his voice, though gentle, grew commanding, "cease your foolish malice, and, inasmuch as one of God's creatures, obey and restore to me my ring."

A little breeze stirred the air. The white hand of the statue shifted from her white bosom, the finger slowly uncrooked and extended itself.

With incredible audacity Eudæmon ran into the trap of the Evil One. He advanced, and, rising on tiptoe, stretched

forth his hand to the idol's. Now indeed would that devil clasp him to her, and singe his flesh on the way to Hell!

But it was not so. Eudæmon took the ring, rubbed it tenderly on his white woollen sleeve, and stuck it slowly and pensively on his own finger.

"Sister Venus," he then said, standing before the statue, with the finches and thrushes and ortolans perching on his shoulders, and the swallows circling round his head, "Sister Venus, I thank you. Forget the malice which foolish mankind have taught you to find in yourself. Remember you are a creature of God's, and good. Teach the flowers to cross their seeds and vary their hues and scents; teach the doves and the swallows and the sheep and the kine and all our speechless brethren to pair and nurse their young; teach the youths and the maidens to love one another and their children. Make this orchard 'to bloom, and these rustics to sing. But, since in this form you have foolishly tried to give scandal as foolish mortals had taught you to do, accept, Sister Venus, a loving punishment, and in the name of Christ, be a statue no longer, but a fair white tree with sweet-smelling blossoms and golden fruit."

Eudæmon stood with his hand raised, and made the sign of the cross.

There was a faint sigh, as of the breeze, and a faint but gathering rustle. And behold, beneath the shining white moon, the statue of Venus changed its outline, put forth minute leaves and twigs, which grew apace, until, while Eudæmon still stood with raised hand, there was a statue no longer at the end of the bowling-green, but a fair orange-tree, with leaves and flowers shining silvery in the moonlight.

Then Eudæmon went in to his prayers; and Carpophorus and Ursicinus returned each in silence, one to his cavern

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and one to his column, and thought themselves much smaller saints for ever in future.

As to the orange-tree, it still stands on the slope of the Cælian, opposite the criss-cross réeds of the Aventine vineyards, beside the little church with the fluted broken columns and the big cactus, like a python, on its apse. And the pigeons are most plentiful, and the figs and clove-pinks most sweet and fragrant all round ; and there is always water in plenty in the well. And that is the story of St. Eudæmon and his Orange-Tree ; but you will not find it in the *Golden Legend* nor in the Bollandists.

Winthrop's Adventure

I

All the intimates at the villa S—— knew Julian Winthrop to be an odd sort of creature, but I am sure no one ever expected from him such an eccentric scene as that which took place on the first Wednesday of last September.

Winthrop had been a constant visitor at the Countess S——'s villa ever since his arrival in Florence, and the better we knew, the more we liked, his fantastic character. Although quite young, he had shown very considerable talent for painting, but every one seemed to agree that this talent would never come to anything. His nature was too impressionable, too mobile, for steady work; and he cared too much for all kinds of art to devote himself exclusively to any one; above all, he had too ungovernable a fancy, and too uncontrollable a love of detail, to fix and complete any impression in an artistic shape; his ideas and fancies were constantly shifting and changing like the shapes in a kaleidoscope, and their instability and variety were the chief sources of his pleasure. All that he did and thought and said had an irresistible tendency to become arabesque, feelings and moods gliding strangely into each other, thoughts and images growing into inextricable tangles, just as when he played he passed insensibly from one fragment to another totally incongruous, and when he drew one form merged into another beneath his pencil. His head was like his sketch-book—full of delightful scraps of colour and quaint, graceful forms, none finished, one on the top of the other: leaves growing out of heads, houses astride on animals, scraps of melodies noted down

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across scraps of verse; gleanings from all quarters—all pleasing, and all jumbled into a fantastic, useless, but very delightful whole. In short, Winthrop's artistic talent was frittered away by his love of the picturesque, and his career was spoilt by his love of adventure; but such as he was, he was almost a work of art, a living arabesque himself.

On this particular Wednesday we were all seated out on the terrace of the villa S—— at Bellosguardo, enjoying the beautiful serene yellow moonlight and the delightful coolness after an intensely hot day. The Countess S——, who was a great musician, was trying over a violin sonata with one of her friends in the drawing-room, of which the doors opened on to the terrace. Winthrop, who had been particularly gay all the evening, had cleared away the plates and cups from the tea-table, had pulled out his sketch-book and begun drawing in his drowsy, irrelevant fashion—acanthus leaves uncurling into siren's tails, satyrs growing out of passion flowers, little Dutch manikins in tail coats and pigtails peeping out of tulip leaves under his whimsical pencil, while he listened partly to the music within, partly to the conversation without.

When the violin sonata had been tried over, passage by passage, sufficiently often, the Countess, instead of returning to us on the terrace, addressed us from the drawing-room—

“Remain where you are,” she said; “I want you to hear an old air which I discovered last week among a heap of rubbish in my father-in-law's lumber room. I think it quite a treasure, as good as a wrought-iron ornament found among a heap of old rusty nails, or a piece of Gubbio majolica found among cracked coffee cups. It is very beautiful to my mind. Just listen.”

The Countess was an uncommonly fine singer, without much voice, and not at all emotional, but highly delicate

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and refined in execution, and with a great knowledge of music. The air which she deemed beautiful could not fail really to be so; but it was so totally different from all we moderns are accustomed to, that it seemed, with its exquisitely-finished phrases, its delicate vocal twirls and spirals, its symmetrically ordered ornaments, to take one into quite another world of musical feeling, of feeling too subdued and artistic, too subtly and cunningly balanced, to move us more than superficially—indeed, it could not move at all, for it expressed no particular state of feeling; it was difficult to say whether it was sad or cheerful; all that could be said was that it was singularly graceful and delicate.

This is how the piece affected me, and I believe, in less degree, all the rest of our party; but, turning towards Winthrop, I was surprised at seeing how very strong an impression its very first bars had made on him. He was seated at the table, his back turned towards me, but I could see that he had suddenly stopped drawing and was listening with intense eagerness. At one moment I almost fancied I saw his hand tremble as it lay on his sketch-book, as if he were breathing spasmodically. I pulled my chair near his; there could be no doubt, his whole frame was quivering.

“Winthrop,” I whispered.

He paid no attention to me, but continued listening intently, and his hand unconsciously crumpled up the sheet he had drawn on.

“Winthrop,” I repeated, touching his shoulder.

“Be quiet,” he answered quickly, as if shaking me off; “let me listen.”

There was something almost fierce in his manner; and this intense emotion caused by a piece which did not move any of the rest of us, struck me as being very odd.

He remained with his head between his hands till the

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end. The piece concluded with a very intricate and beautiful passage of execution, and with a curious sort of sighing fall from a high note on to a lower one, short and repeated at various intervals, with lovely effect.

"Bravo! beautiful!" cried every one. "A real treasure; so quaint and so elegant, and so admirably sung!"

I looked at Winthrop. He had turned round; his face was flushed, and he leaned against his chair as if oppressed by emotion.

The Countess returned to the terrace. "I am glad you like the piece," she said; "it is a graceful thing. Good heavens! Mr. Winthrop!" she suddenly interrupted herself; "what is the matter? are you ill?"

For ill he certainly did look.

He rose and, making an effort, answered in a husky, uncertain voice—

"It's nothing, I suddenly felt cold. I think I'll go in—or rather, no, I'll stay. What is—what is that air you have just sung?"

"That air?" she answered absently, for the sudden change in Winthrop's manner put everything else out of her thoughts. "That air? Oh! it is by a very forgotten composer of the name of Barbella, who lived somewhere about the year 1780." It was evident that she considered this question as a sort of mask to his sudden emotion.

"Would you let me see the score?" he asked quickly.

"Certainly. Will you come into the drawing-room? I left it on the piano."

The piano candles were still lit; and as they stood there she watched his face with as much curiosity as myself. But Winthrop took no notice of either of us; he had eagerly snatched the score, and was looking at it in a fixed, vacant way. When he looked up his face was ashy; he handed me the score mechanically. It was an old yellow, blurred manuscript, in some now disused clef, and

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the initial words, written in a grand, florid style, were: "Sei Regina, io son pastore." The Countess was still under the impression that Winthrop was trying to hide his agitation by pretending great interest in the song; but I, having seen his extraordinary emotion during its performance, could not doubt of the connection between them.

"You say the piece is very rare," said Winthrop; "do you—do you then think that no one besides yourself is acquainted with it at present?"

"Of course I can't affirm that," answered the Countess, "but this much I know, that Professor G——, who is one of the most learned of musical authorities, and to whom I showed the piece, had heard neither of it nor of its composer, and that he positively says it exists in no musical archives in Italy or in Paris."

"Then how," I asked, "do you know that it is of about the year 1780?"

"By the style; Professor G—— compared it at my request with some compositions of that day, and the style perfectly coincides."

"You think, then," continued Winthrop slowly, but eagerly—"you think, then, that no one else sings it at present?"

"I should say not; at least it seems highly unlikely."

Winthrop was silent, and continued looking at the score, but, as it seemed to me, mechanically.

Some of the rest of the party had meanwhile entered the drawing-room.

"Did you notice Mr. Winthrop's extraordinary behaviour?" whispered a lady to the Countess. "What *has* happened to him?"

"I can't conceive. He is excessively impressionable, but I don't see how that piece could impress him at all; it is a sweet thing, but so unemotional," I answered.

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"That piece!" replied the Countess: "you don't suppose that piece has anything to do with it?"

"Indeed I do; it has everything to do with it. In short, I noticed that from the very first notes it violently affected him."

"Then all these inquiries about it?"

"Are perfectly genuine."

"It cannot be the piece itself which has moved him, and he can scarcely have heard it before. It's very odd. There certainly is something the matter with him."

There certainly was; Winthrop was excessively pale and agitated, all the more so as he perceived that he had become an object of universal curiosity. He evidently wished to make his escape, but was afraid of doing so too suddenly. He was standing behind the piano, looking mechanically at the old score.

"Have you ever heard that piece before, Mr. Winthrop?" asked the Countess, unable to restrain her curiosity.

He looked up, much discomposed, and answered after a moment's hesitation: "How can I have heard it, since you are the sole possessor of it?"

"The sole possessor? Oh! I never said that. I thought it unlikely, but perhaps there is some other. Tell me, is there another? Where did you hear that piece before?"

"I did not say I had heard it before," he rejoined hurriedly.

"But have you, or have you not?" persisted the Countess.

"I never have," he answered decidedly, but immediately reddened as if conscious of prevarication. "Don't ask me any questions," he added quickly; "it worries me," and in a minute he was off.

We looked at each other in mute astonishment. This astonishing behaviour, this mixture of concealment and

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rudeness, above all, the violent excitement in which Winthrop had evidently been, and his unaccountable eagerness respecting the piece which the Countess had sung, all this entirely baffled our efforts at discovery.

"There is some mystery at the bottom of it," we said, and further we could not get.

Next evening, as we were seated once more in the Countess's drawing-room, we of course reverted to Winthrop's extraordinary behaviour.

"Do you think he will return soon?" asked one of us.

"I should think he would rather let the matter blow over, and wait till we had forgotten his absurdity," answered the Countess.

At that moment the door opened, and Winthrop entered.

He seemed confused and at a loss what to say; he did not answer our trivial remarks, but suddenly burst out, as if with a great effort:

"I have come to beg you to forgive my last night's behaviour. Forgive my rudeness and my want of openness; but I could not have explained anything then: that piece, you must know, had given me a great shock."

"A great shock? And how could it give you a shock?" we all exclaimed.

"You surely don't mean that so prim a piece as that could have affected you?" asked the Countess's sister.

"If it did," added the Countess, "it is the greatest miracle music ever worked."

"It is difficult to explain the matter," hesitated Winthrop; "but—in short—that piece gave me a shock because as soon as I heard the first bars I recognized it."

"And you told me you had never heard it before!" exclaimed the Countess indignantly.

"I know I did; it was not true, but neither was it quite false. All I can say is that I knew the piece; whether I had heard it before, or not, I knew it—in fact," he dashed

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out, "you will think me mad, but I had long doubted whether the piece existed at all, and I was so moved just because your performance proved that it *did* exist. Look here," and pulling a sketch-book from his pocket he was just about to open it when he stopped—"Have you got the notes of that piece?" he asked hurriedly.

"Here they are," and the Countess handed him the old roll of music.

He did not look at it, but turned over the leaves of his sketch-book.

"See," he said after a minute; "look at this," and he pushed the open sketch-book across the table to us. On it, among a lot of sketches, were some roughly ruled lines, with some notes scrawled in pencil, and the words "*Sei Regina, io Pastor sono.*"

"Why, this is the beginning of the very air!" exclaimed the Countess. "How did you get this?"

We compared the notes in the sketch-book with those on the score; they were the same, but in another clef and tone.

Winthrop sat opposite, looking doggedly at us. After a moment he remarked—

"They are the same notes, are they not? Well, this pencil scrawl was done in July of last year, while the ink of this score has been dry ninety years; yet when I wrote down these notes, I swear I did not know that any such score existed, and until yesterday I disbelieved it."

"Then," remarked one of the party, "there are only two explanations: either you composed this melody yourself, not knowing that some one else had done so ninety years ago; or, you heard that piece without knowing what it was."

"Explanation!" cried Winthrop contemptuously: "why, don't you see, that it is just what needs explain-

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ing! Of course, I either composed it myself or heard it, but which of the two was it?"

We remained much humbled and silenced.

"This is a very astonishing puzzle," remarked the Countess, "and I think it useless to rack our brains about it since Mr. Winthrop is the only person who can explain it. We don't and can't understand; he can and must explain it himself. I don't know," she added, "whether there is any reason for not explaining the mystery to us; but if not, I wish you would."

"There is no reason," he answered, "except that you would set me down as a maniac. The story is so absurd a one—you will never believe me—and yet . . ."

"Then there is a story at the bottom of it!" exclaimed the Countess. "What is it? Can't you tell it us?"

Winthrop gave a sort of deprecatory shrug, and trifled with the paper cutters and dogs eared the books on the table. "Well," he said at last, "if you really wish to know—why, perhaps I might as well tell it you; only don't tell me afterwards that I am mad. Nothing can alter the fact of the real existence of that piece; and, as long as you continue to regard it as unique, I cannot but regard my adventure as being true."

We were afraid lest he might slip away through all these deprecatory premisings, and that afterwards we might hear no story whatever; so we summoned him to begin at once, and he, keeping his head well in the shadow of the lamp-shade, and scribbling as usual on his sketch-book, began his narrative, at first slowly and hesitatingly, with plentiful interruptions, but, as he grew more interested in it, becoming extremely rapid and dramatic, and exceedingly minute in details.

II

You must know (said Winthrop), that about a year

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and a half ago I spent the autumn with some cousins of mine, rambling about Lombardy. In poking into all sorts of odd nooks and corners, we made the acquaintance at M—— of a highly learned and highly snuffy old gentleman (I believe he was a count or a marchese), who went by the nickname of Maestro Fa Diesis (Master F-Sharp), and who possessed a very fine collection of things musical, a perfect museum. He had a handsome old palace, which was literally tumbling to pieces, and of which the whole first floor was taken up by his collections. His old MSS., his precious missals, his papyri, his autographs, his black-letter books, his prints and pictures, his innumerable ivory inlaid harpsichords and ebony fretted lutes and viols, lived in fine, spacious rooms, with carved oaken ceilings and painted window frames, while he lived in some miserable little garret to the back, on what I can't say, but I should judge, by the spectral appearance of his old woman servant and of a half-imbecile boy who served him, on nothing more substantial than bean husks and warm water. They seemed to suffer from this diet, but I suspect that their master must have absorbed some mysterious vivifying fluid from his MSS. and old instruments, for he seemed to be made of steel, and was the most provokingly active old fellow, keeping one's nerves in perpetual irritation by his friskiness and volubility. He cared for nothing in the wide world save his collections; he had cut down tree after tree, he had sold field after field and farm after farm; he had sold his furniture, his tapestries, his plate, his family papers, his own clothes. He would have taken the tiles off his roof and the glass out of his windows to buy some score of the sixteenth century, some illuminated mass book or some Cremonese fiddle. For music itself I firmly believe he cared not a jot, and regarded it as useful only inasmuch as it had produced the objects of his passion, the things which he

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could spend all his life in dusting, labelling, counting, and cataloguing, for not a chord, not a note was ever heard in his house, and he would have died rather than spend a soldino on going to the opera.

My cousin, who is music mad after a fashion, quickly secured the old gentleman's good will by accepting a hundred commissions for the obtaining of catalogues and the attending of sales, and we were consequently permitted daily to enter that strange, silent house full of musical things, and to examine its contents at our leisure, always, however, under old Fa Diesis's vigilant supervision. The house, its contents, and proprietor formed a grotesque whole, which had a certain charm for me. I used often to fancy that the silence could be only apparent; that, as soon as the master had drawn his bolts and gone off to bed, all this slumbering music would awake, that the pictures of dead musicians would slip out of their frames, the glass cases fly open, the big paunched inlaid lutes turn into stately Flemish burghers, with brocaded doublets; the yellow, faded sides of the Cremonese bass viols expand into the stiff satin hoops of powdered ladies; and the little ribbed mandolins put forth a party-coloured leg and a bushy-haired head, and hop about as Provençal Court dwarfs or Renaissance pages, while the Egyptian sistrum and fife player would slip from off the hieroglyphics of the papyrus, and all the parchment palimpsests of Greek musicians turn into chlamys-robed auletes, and citharædi; then the kettle-drums and tamtams would strike up, the organ tubes would suddenly be filled with sound, the old gilded harpsichords would jingle like fury, the old chapel-master yonder, in his peruke and furred robe, would beat time on his picture frame, and the whole motley company set to dancing; until all of a sudden old Fa Diesis, awakened by the noise, and suspecting thieves, would rush in

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wildly in his dressing-gown, a three-wicked kitchen lamp in one hand and his great-grandfather's court sword in the other, when all the dancers and players would start and slide back into their frames and cases. I should not, however, have gone so often to the old gentleman's museum had not my cousin extorted from me the promise of a water-colour sketch of a picture of Palestrina, which, for some reason or other, she (for the cousin was a lady, which explains my docility) chose to consider as particularly authentic. It was a monster, a daub, which I shuddered at, and my admiration for Palestrina would have rather induced me to burn the hideous, blear-eyed, shoulderless thing; but musical folk have their whims, and hers was to hang a copy of this monstrosity over her grand piano. So I acceded, took my drawing block and easel, and set off for Fa Diesis's palace. This palace was a queer old place, full of ups and downs and twistings and turnings, and in going to the only tolerably lighted room of the house, whither the delightful subject for my brush had been transported for my convenience, we had to pass through a narrow and wriggling corridor somewhere in the heart of the building. In doing so we passed by a door up some steps.

"By the way," explained old Fa Diesis, "have I shown you this? 'Tis of no great value, but still, as a painter, it may interest you." He mounted the steps, pushed open the door, which was ajar, and ushered me into a small, bleak, whitewashed lumber-room, peopled with broken book-shelves, crazy music desks, and unsteady chairs and tables, the whole covered by a goodly layer of dust. On the walls were a few time-stained portraits in corslets and bobwigs, the senatorial ancestors of Fa Diesis, who had had to make room for the book-shelves and instrument-cases filling the state rooms. The old gentleman opened a shutter, and threw the full light upon another old

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picture, from whose cracked surface he deliberately swept away the dust with the rusty sleeve of his fur-lined coat.

I approached it. "This is not a bad picture," I said at once; "by no means a bad picture."

"Indeed," exclaimed Fa Diesis. Oh, then, perhaps, I may sell it. What do you think? Is it worth much?"

I smiled. "Well, it is not a Raphael," I answered; "but, considering its date and the way people then smeared, it is quite creditable."

"Ah!" sighed the old fellow, much disappointed.

It was a half-length, life-size portrait of a man in the costume of the latter part of the last century—a pale lilac silk coat, a pale pea-green satin waistcoat, both extremely delicate in tint, and a deep warm-tinted amber cloak; the voluminous cravat was loosened, the large collar flapped back, the body slightly turned, and the head somewhat looking over the shoulder, Cenci fashion.

The painting was uncommonly good for an Italian portrait of the eighteenth century, and had much that reminded me, though of course vastly inferior technically, of Greuze—a painter I detest, and who yet fascinates me. The features were irregular and small, with intensely red lips and a crimson flush beneath the transparent bronzed skin; the eyes were slightly upturned and looking sideways, in harmony with the turn of the head and the parted lips, and they were beautiful, brown, soft, like those of some animals, with a vague, wistful depth of look. The whole had the clear greyiness, the hazy, downy touch of Greuze, and left that strange mixed impression which all the portraits of his school do. The face was not beautiful; it had something at once sullen and effeminate, something odd and not entirely agreeable; yet it attracted and riveted your attention with its dark, warm colour, rendered all the more striking for the light, pearly,

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powdered locks, and the general lightness and haziness of touch.

"It is a very good portrait in its way," I said, "though not of the sort that people buy. There are faults of drawing here and there, but the colour and touch are good. By whom is it?"

Old Fa Diesis, whose vision of heaps of banknotes to be obtained in exchange for the picture had been rudely cut short, seemed rather sulky.

"I don't know by whom it is," he grumbled. "If it's bad its bad, and may remain here."

"And whom does it represent?"

"A singer. You see he has got a score in his hand. A certain Rinaldi, who lived about a hundred years ago."

Fa Diesis had rather a contempt for singers, regarding them as poor creatures, who were of no good, since they left nothing behind them that could be collected, except indeed in the case of Madame Banti, one of whose lungs he possessed in spirits of wine.

We went out of the room, and I set about my copy of that abominable old portrait of Palestrina. At dinner that day I mentioned the portrait of the singer to my cousins, and somehow or other I caught myself using expressions about it which I should not have used in the morning. In trying to describe the picture my recollection of it seemed to differ from the original impression. It returned to my mind as something strange and striking. My cousin wished to see it, so the next morning she accompanied me to old Fa Diesis's palace. How it affected her I don't know; but for me it had a queer sort of interest, quite apart from that in the technical execution. There was something peculiar and unaccountable in the look of that face, a yearning, half-pained look, which I could not well define to myself. I became gradually aware that the portrait was, so to speak, haunting me. Those strange red

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lips and wistful eyes rose up in my mind. I instinctively and without well knowing why reverted to it in our conversation.

"I wonder who he was," I said, as we sat in the square behind the cathedral apse, eating our ices in the cool autumn evening.

"Who?" asked my cousin.

"Why, the original of that portrait at old Fa Diesis's; such a weird face. I wonder who he was?"

My cousins paid no attention to my speech, for they did not share that vague, unaccountable feeling with which the picture had inspired me, but as we walked along the silent porticoed streets, where only the illuminated sign of an inn or the chestnut-roasting brazier of a fruit stall flickered in the gloom, and crossed the vast desolate square surrounded by Oriental-like cupolas and minarets, where the green bronze condottiere rode on his green bronze charger—during our evening ramble through the quaint Lombard city my thoughts kept reverting to the picture, with its hazy, downy, colour and curious, unfathomed expression.

The next day was the last of our stay at M——, and I went to Fa Diesis's palace to finish my sketch, to take leave, present thanks for his civility towards us, and inquire whether we could execute any commission for him. In going to the room where I had left my easel and painting things, I passed through the dark, wriggling lobby and by the door up the three steps. The door was ajar, and I entered the room where the portrait was. I approached and examined it carefully. The man was apparently singing, or rather about to sing, for the red, well-cut lips were parted; and in his hand—a beautiful plump, white, blue-veined hand, strangely out of keeping with the brown, irregular face—he held an open roll of notes. The notes were mere unintelligible blotches, but I made

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out, written on the score, the name—Ferdinando Rinaldi, 1782; and above, the words—"Sei Regina, io pastor sono." The face had a beauty, a curious, irregular beauty, and in those deep, soft eyes there was something like a magnetic power, which I felt, and which others must have felt before me. I finished my sketch, strapped up my case and paint-box, gave a parting snarl at the horrible blear-eyed, shoulderless Palestrina, and prepared to leave. Fa Diesis, who, in his snuffy fur-lined coat, the tassel of his tarnished blue skull-cap bobbing over his formidable nose, was seated at a desk hard by, rose also, and politely escorted me through the passage.

"By the way," I asked, "do you know an air called 'Sei Regina, io Pastor sono'?"

"'Sei Regina, io Pastor sono?' No, such an air doesn't exist." All airs not in his library had no business to exist, even if they did.

"It must exist," I persisted; "those words are written on the score held by the singer on that picture of yours."

"That's no proof," he cried peevishly; "it may be merely some fancy title, or else—or else it may be some rubbishy *trunk air* (*aria di baule*)."

"What is a *trunk air*?" I asked in amazement.

"A *trunk air*," he explained, "was a wretched air—merely a few trumpery notes and lots of pauses, on to which great singers used formerly to make their own variations. They used to insert them in every opera they sang in, and drag them all over the world; that was why they were called trunk airs. They had no merit of their own—no one ever cared to sing them except the singer to whom they belonged—no one ever kept such rubbish as that! It all went to wrap up sausages or make curl-papers." And old Fa Diesis laughed his grim little cackling laugh.

He then dropped the subject, and said—

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"If I had an opportunity, or one of my illustrious family, of obtaining any catalogues of musical curiosities or attending any sales"—he was still searching for the first printed copy of Guido of Arezzo's "*Micrologus*"—he had copies of all the other editions, a unique collection; there was also one specimen wanting to complete his set of Amati's fiddles, one with *fleurs-de-lys* on the sounding board, constructed for Charles IX of France—alas! he had spent years looking for that instrument—he would pay—yes, he, as I saw him there, he standing before me, would pay five hundred golden *marenghi** for that violin with the *fleurs-de-lys*. . . .

"Pardon me," I interrupted rather rudely; "may I see this picture again?"

We had come to the door up the three steps.

"Certainly," he answered, and continued his speech about the Amati violin with the *fleurs-de-lys*, getting more and more frisky and skippery every moment.

That strange face with its weird, yearning look! I remained motionless before it while the old fellow jabbered and gesticulated like a maniac. What a deep incomprehensible look in those eyes!

"Was he a very famous singer?" I asked, by way of saying something.

"He? *Eh altro!* I should think so! Do you think perhaps the singers of that day were like ours? Pish! Look at all they did in that day. Their paper made of linen rag, no tearing *that*; and how they built their violins! Oh, what times those were!"

"Do you know anything about this man?" I asked.

"About this singer, this Rinaldi? Oh, yes; he was a very great singer, but he ended badly."

"Badly? In what way?"

* A Lombard coin struck by Napoleon after the battle of Marengo, and by which elderly people still occasionally count.

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"Why—you know what such people are, and then youth! we have all been young, all young!" and old Fa Diesis shrugged his shrivelled person.

"What happened to him?" I persisted, continuing to look at the portrait; it seemed as if there were life in those soft, velvety eyes, and as if those red lips were parting in a sigh—a long, weary sigh.

"Well," answered Fa Diesis, "this Ferdinando Rinaldi was a very great singer. About the year 1780 he took service with the Court of Parma. There, it is said, he obtained too great notice from a lady in high favour at Court, and was consequently dismissed. Instead of going to a distance, he kept hanging about the frontier of Parma, now here, now there, for he had many friends among the nobility. Whether he was suspected of attempting to return to Parma, or whether he spoke with less reserve than he should, I don't know. *Basta!* one fine morning he was found lying on the staircase landing of our Senator Negri's house, stabbed."

Old Fa Diesis pulled out his horn snuff-box.

"Who had done it, no one ever knew or cared to know. A packet of letters, which his valet said he always carried on his person, was all that was found missing. The lady left Parma and entered the Convent of the Clarisse here; she was my father's aunt, and this portrait belonged to her. A common story, a common story in those days."

And the old gentleman rammed his long nose with snuff.

"You really don't think I could sell the picture?" he asked.

"No!" I answered very decidedly, for I felt a sort of shudder. I took leave, and that evening we set off for Rome.

Winthrop paused, and asked for a cup of tea. He was flushed and seemed excited, but at the same time anxious to end his story. When he had taken his tea, he pushed

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back his irregular hair with both hands, gave a little sigh of recollection, and began again as follows:—

III

I returned to M—— the next year, on my way to Venice, and stopped a couple of days in the old place, having to bargain for certain Renaissance carved work, which a friend wished to buy. It was midsummer; the fields which I had left planted with cabbages and covered with white frost were tawny with ripe corn, and the vine garlands drooped down to kiss the tall, compact green hemp; the dark streets were reeking with heat, the people were all sprawling about under colonnade and awning; it was the end of June in Lombardy, God's own orchard on earth. I went to old Fa Diesis's palace to ask whether he had any commissions for Venice; he might, indeed, be in the country, but the picture, *the* portrait was at his palace, and that was enough for me. I had often thought of it in the winter, and I wondered whether now, with the sun blazing through every chink, I should still be impressed by it as I had been in the gloomy autumn. Fa Diesis was at home, and overjoyed to see me; he jumped and frisked about like a figure in the Dance of Death, in intense excitement about certain MSS. he had lately seen. He narrated, or rather acted, for it was all in the present tense and accompanied by appropriate gestures, a journey he had recently made to Guastalla to see a psalter at a monastery; how he had bargained for a postchaise, how the postchaise had upset half-way; how he had sworn at the driver; how he had rung—dring, dring—at the monastery door; how he cunningly pretended to be in quest of an old, valueless crucifix; how the monks had had the impudence to ask a hundred and fifty francs for it. How he had hummed and hah'd, and, pretending sud-

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denly to notice the psaltery, had asked what it was, etc., as if he did not know; and finally struck the bargain for both crucifix and psaltery for a hundred and fifty francs—a psaltery of the year 1310 for a hundred and fifty francs! And those idiots of monks were quite overjoyed! They thought they had cheated me—cheated me! And he frisked about in an ecstasy of pride and triumph. We had got to the well-known door; it was open; I could see the portrait. The sun streamed brightly on the brown face and light powdered locks. I know not how; I felt a momentary giddiness and sickness, as if of long desired, unexpected pleasure; it lasted but an instant, and I was ashamed of myself.

Fa Diesis was in splendid spirits.

“Do you see that?” he said, forgetting all he had previously told me—“that is a certain Ferdinando Rinaldi, a singer, who was assassinated for making love to my great-aunt”; and he stalked about in great glee, thinking of the psaltery at Guastalla, and fanning himself complacently with a large green fan.

A thought suddenly struck me—

“It happened here at M——, did it not?”

“To be sure.”

And Fa Diesis continued shuffling to and fro in his old red and blue dressing-gown, with parrots and cherry branches on it.

“Did you never know anyone who had seen him—heard him?”

“I? Never. How could I? He was killed ninety-four years ago.”

Ninety-four years ago! I looked up at the portrait; ninety-four years ago! and yet—— The eyes seemed to me to have a strange, fixed, intent look.

“And where——” I hesitated despite myself, “where did it happen?”

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"That few people know; no one, probably, except me, nowadays," he answered with satisfaction. "But my father pointed out the house to me when I was little; it had belonged to a Marchese Negri, but somehow or other, after that affair, no one would live there any longer, and it was left to rot; already, when I was a child, it was all deserted and falling to pieces. A fine house, though! A fine house! and one which ought to have been worth something. I saw it again some years ago—I rarely go outside the gates now—outside Porta San Vitale—about a mile."

"Outside Porta San Vitale? the house where this Rinaldi was—it is still there?"

Fa Diesis looked at me with intense contempt.

"Bagatella!" (fiddlestick) he exclaimed. "Do you think a villa flies away like that?"

"You are sure?"

"Per Bacco! as sure as that I see you—outside Porta San Vitale an old tumbledown place with obelisks and vases, and that sort of thing."

We had come to the head of the staircase. "Good-bye," I said; "I'll return to-morrow for your parcels for Venice," and I ran down the stair. "Outside Porta San Vitale!" I said to myself; "outside Porta San Vitale!" It was six in the afternoon and the heat still intense; I hailed a crazy old cab, a sky-blue carriage of the year '20, with a cracked hood and emblazoned panels. "Dove commanda?" (whither do you command?) asked the sleepy driver. "Outside Porta San Vitale," I cried. He touched his bony, long-maned white horse, and off we jolted over the uneven pavement, past the red Lombard cathedral and baptistery, through the long, dark Via San Vitale, with its grand old palaces; under the red gate with the old word "Libertas" still on it, along a dusty road bordered by acacias out into the rich Lombard plain. On

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we rattled through the fields of corn, hemp, and glossy dark maize, ripening under the rich evening sun. In the distance the purple walls and belfries and shining cupolas gleaming in the light; beyond, the vast blue and gold and hazy plain, bounded by the far-off Alps. The air was warm and serene, everything quiet and solemn. But I was excited. I sought out every large country house; I went wherever a tall belvedere tower peeped from behind the elms and poplars; I crossed and recrossed the plain, taking one lane after another, as far as where the road branched off to Crevalcuore; passed villa after villa, but found none with vases and obelisks, none crumbling and falling, none that could have been *the* villa. What wonder, indeed? Fa Diesis had seen it, but Fa Diesis was seventy, and that—that had happened ninety-four years ago! Still I might be mistaken; I might have gone too far or not far enough—there was lane within lane and road within road. Perhaps the house was screened by trees, or perhaps it lay towards the next gate. So I went again, through the cyclamen-lined lanes, overhung by gnarled mulberries and oaks; I looked up at one house after another: all were old, many dilapidated, some seeming old churches with walled-up colonnades, others built up against old watch-towers; but of what old Fa Diesis had described I could see nothing. I asked the driver, and the driver asked the old women and the fair-haired children who crowded out of the little farms. Did anyone know of a large deserted house with obelisks and vases—a house that had once belonged to a Marchese Negri? Not in that neighbourhood; there was the Villa Montecasignoli with the tower and the sundial, which was dilapidated enough, and the Casino Fava crumbling in yonder cabbage-field, but neither had vases nor obelisks, neither had ever belonged to a Marchese Negri.

‘At last, I gave it up in despair. Ninety-four years ago!

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The house no longer existed; so I returned to my inn, where the three jolly mediæval pilgrims swung over the door lamp; took my supper and tried to forget the whole matter.

Next day I went and finally settled with the owner of the carved work I had been commissioned to buy, and then I sauntered lazily about the old town. The day after there was to be a great fair, and preparations were being made for it; baskets and hampers being unloaded, and stalls put up everywhere in the great square; festoons of tinware and garlands of onions were slung across the Gothic arches of the Town Hall and to its massive bronze torch-holders; there was a quack already holding forth on the top of his stage coach, with a skull and many bottles before him, and a little bespangled page handing about his bills; there was a puppet-show at a corner, with a circle of empty chairs round it, just under the stone pulpit where the monks of the Middle Ages had once exhorted the Montagus and Capulets of M—— to make peace and embrace. I sauntered about among the crockery and glassware, picking my way among the packing-cases and hay, and among the vociferating peasants and townsfolk. I looked at the figs and cherries and red peppers in the baskets, at the old ironwork, rusty keys, nails, chains, bits of ornament on the stalls; at the vast blue and green glazed umbrellas, at the old prints and images of saints tied against the church bench, at the whole moving, quarrelling, gesticulating crowd. I bought an old silver death's-head trinket at the table of a perambulating watch-maker, and some fresh sweet peas and roses from a peasant woman selling fowls and turkeys; then I turned into the maze of quaint little paved streets, protected by chains from carts and carriages, and named after mediæval hostelries and labelled on little slabs, "Scimmia" (monkey), "Alemagna" (Germany);

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"Venetia," and, most singular of all, "Brocca in dosso" (Jug on the Back). Behind the great, red, time-stained, castle-like Town Hall were a number of tinkers' dens; and beneath its arches hung caldrons, pitchers, saucepans, and immense pudding moulds with the imperial eagle of Austria on them, capacious and ancient enough to have contained the puddings of generations of German Cæsars. Then I poked into some of those wondrous curiosity-shops of M——, little black dens, where oaken presses contain heaps and heaps of brocaded dresses and embroidered waistcoats, and yards of lace, and splendid chasubles, the spoils of centuries of magnificence. I walked down the main street and saw a crowd collected round a man with an immense white crested owl; the creature was such a splendid one, I determined to buy him and keep him in my studio at Venice, but when I approached him he flew at me, shaking his wings and screeching so that I beat an ignominious retreat. At length I returned to the square and sat down beneath an awning, where two bare-legged urchins served me excellent snow and lemon juice, at the price of a sou the glass. In short, I enjoyed my last day at M—— amazingly; and, in this bright, sunny square, with all the bustle about me, I wondered whether the person who the previous evening had scoured the country in search of a crazy villa where a man had been assassinated ninety-four years ago, could really and truly have been myself.

So I spent the morning; and the afternoon I passed indoors, packing up the delicate carved work with my own hands, although the perspiration ran down my face, and I gasped for air. At length, when evening and coolness were approaching, I took my hat and went once more to Fa Diesis's palace.

I found the old fellow in his many-coloured dressing-gown,* seated in his cool, dusky room, among his inlaid

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lutes and Cremonese viols, carefully mending the torn pages of an illuminated missal, while his old, witchlike housekeeper was cutting out and pasting labels on to a heap of manuscript scores on the table. Fa Diesis got up, jumped about ecstasically, made magnificent speeches, and said that since I insisted on being of use to him, he had prepared half a dozen letters, which I might kindly leave on various correspondents of his at Venice, in order to save the twopenny stamp for each. The grim, lank, old fellow, with his astounding dressing-gown and cap, his lantern-jawed housekeeper, his old, morose grey cat, and his splendid harpsichords and lutes and missals, amused me more than usual. I sat with him for some time while he patched away at his missal. Mechanically I turned over the yellow pages of a music book that lay, waiting for a label, under my hand and mechanically my eye fell on the words, in faded, yellow ink, at the top of one of the pieces, the indication of its performer:—

Rondò di Cajo Gracco, "Mille pene mio tesoro," per il Signor Ferdinando Rin Jdi. Parma, 1782.

I positively started, for somehow that whole business had gone out of my mind.

"What have you got there?" asked Fa Diesis, perhaps a little suspiciously, and leaning across the table, he twitched the notes towards him—

"Oh, only that old opera of Cimarosa's— Ah, by the way, per Bacco, how could I have made such a mistake yesterday? Didn't I tell you that Rinaldi had been stabbed in a villa outside Porta San Vitale?"

"Yes," I cried eagerly. "Why?"

"Why, I can't conceive how, but I must have been thinking about that blessed psaltery at San Vitale, at Guastalla. The villa where Rinaldi was killed is outside Porta San Zaccaria, in the direction of the river, near that old monastery where there are those frescoes .by—I.

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forget the fellow's name, that all the foreigners go to see. Don't you know?"

"Ah," I exclaimed, "I understand." And I did understand, for Porta San Zaccaria happens to be at exactly the opposite end of the town to Porta San Vitale, and here was the explanation of my unsuccessful search of the previous evening. So after all the house might still be standing; and the desire to see it again seized hold of me. I rose, took the letters, which I strongly suspected contained other letters whose postage was to be saved in the same way, by being delivered by the original correspondent, and prepared to depart.

"Good-bye, good-bye," said old Fa Diesis, with effusion, as we passed through the dark passage in order to get to the staircase. "Continue, my dear friend in those paths of wisdom and culture which the youth of our days has so miserably abandoned, in order that the sweet promise of your happy silver youth be worthily accomplished in your riper—— Ah, by the way," he interrupted himself, "I have forgotten to give you a little pamphlet of mine on the manufacture of violin strings which I wish to send as an act of reverence to my old friend the Commander of the garrison of Venice"; and off he scuttled. I was near the door up the three steps and could not resist the temptation of seeing the picture once more. I pushed open the door and entered; a long ray of the declining sunlight, reflected from the neighbouring red church tower, fell across the face of the portrait, playing on the light, powdered hair and on the downy, well-cut lips, and ending in a tremulous crimson stain on the boarded floor. I went close up to the picture; there was the name "Ferdinando Rinaldi, 1782," on the roll of music he was holding; but the notes themselves were mere imitative, meaningless smears and blotches, although the title of the piece stood distinct and legible. "Sei Regina, io Pastor sono."

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"Why, where is he?" cried Fa Diesis's shrill voice in the passage. "Ah, here you are"; and he handed me the pamphlet, pompously addressed to the illustrious General S——, at Venice. I put it in my pocket.

"You won't forget to deliver it?" he asked, and then went on with the speech he had before begun: "Let the promise of your happy silver youth be fulfilled in a golden manhood, in order that the world may mark down your name *albo lapillo*. Ah," he continued, "perhaps we shall never meet again. I am old, my dear friend, I am old!" and he smacked his lips. "Perhaps, when you return to M——, I may have gone to rest with my immortal ancestors, who, as you know, intermarried with the Ducal family of Sforza, A.D. 1490!"

The last time! This might be the last time I saw the picture! What would become of it after old Fa Diesis's death? I turned once more towards it, in leaving the room; the last flicker of light fell on the dark, yearning face, and it seemed, in the trembling sunbeam, as if the head turned and looked towards me. I never saw the portrait again.

I walked along quickly through the darkening streets, on through the crowd of loiterers and pleasure seekers, on towards Porta San Zaccaria. It was late, but if I hastened, I might still have an hour of twilight. And next morning I had to leave M——. This was my last opportunity. I could not relinquish it; so on I went, heedless of the ominous puffs of warm, damp air, and of the rapidly clouding sky.

It was St. John's Eve, and bonfires began to appear on the little hills round the town; fire-balloons were sent up, and the great bell of the cathedral boomed out in honour of the coming holiday. I threaded my way through the dusty streets and out by Porta San Zaccaria. I walked smartly along the avenues of poplars along the walls, and

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then cut across into the fields by a lane leading towards the river. Behind me were the city walls, all crenelated and jagged; in front the tall belfry and cypresses of the Carthusian monastery; above, the starless, moonless sky, overhung by heavy clouds. The air was mild and relaxing; every now and then there came a gust of hot, damp wind, making a shudder run across the silver poplars and trailed vines; a few heavy drops fell, admonishing me of the coming storm, and every moment some of the light faded away. But I was determined; was not this my last opportunity? So on I stumbled through the rough lane, on through the fields of corn and sweet, fresh-scented hemp, the fireflies dancing in fantastic spirals before me. Something dark wriggled across my path; I caught it on my stick: it was a long, slimy snake which slipped quickly off. The frogs roared for rain, the crickets sawed with ominous loudness, the fireflies crossed and recrossed before me; yet on I went, quicker and quicker in the fast increasing darkness. A broad sheet of pink lightning and a distant rumble: more drops fell; the frogs roared louder, the crickets sawed faster and faster, the air got heavier and the sky yellow and lurid where the sun had set; yet on I went towards the river. Suddenly down came a tremendous stream of rain, as if the heavens had opened, and with it down came the darkness, complete though sudden; the storm had changed evening into the deepest night. What should I do? Return? How? I saw a light glimmering behind a dark mass of trees; I would go on; there must be a house out there, where I could take shelter till the storm was over; I was too far to get back to the town. So on I went in the pelting rain. The lane made a sudden bend, and I found myself in an open space in the midst of the fields, before an iron gate, behind which, surrounded by trees, rose a dark, vast mass; a rent in the clouds permitted me to distinguish a gaunt, grey villa,

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with broken obelisks on its triangular front. My heart gave a great thump; I stopped, the rain continuing to stream down. A dog began to bark furiously from a little peasant's house on the other side of the road, whence issued the light I had perceived. The door opened and a man appeared holding a lamp.

"Who's there?" he cried.

I went up to him. He held up the light and surveyed me.

"Ah!" he said immediately, "a stranger—a foreigner. Pray enter, illustrissimo." My dress and my sketch-book had immediately revealed what I was; he took me for an artist, one of the many who visited the neighbouring Carthusian Abbey, who had lost his way in the maze of little lanes.

I shook the rain off me and entered the low room, whose whitewashed walls were lit yellow by the kitchen fire. A picturesque group of peasants stood out in black outline on the luminous background: an old woman was spinning on her classic distaff, a young one was unravelling skeins of thread on a sort of rotating star; another was cracking pea pods; an old, close-shaven man sat smoking with his elbows on the table, and opposite to him sat a portly priest in three-cornered hat, knee-breeches, and short coat. They rose and looked at me, and welcomed me with the familiar courtesy of their class; the priest offered me his seat, the girl took my soaking coat and hat, and hung them over the fire, the young man brought an immense hempen towel, and proceeded to dry me, much to the general hilarity. They had been reading their usual stories of Charlemagne in their well-thumbed "*Reali di Francia*," that encyclopædia of Italian peasants; but they put by their books on my entrance and began talking, questioning me on every possible and impossible subject. Was it true that it always rained in England? (at that rate,

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remarked the old man shrewdly, how could the English grow grapes; and if they did not make wine, what could they live on?) Was it true that one could pick up lumps of gold somewhere in England? Was there any town as large as M—— in that country? etc., etc. The priest thought these questions foolish, and inquired with much gravity after the health of Milord Vellington, who, he understood, had been seriously unwell of late. I scarcely listened; I was absent and pre-occupied. I gave the women my sketch-book to look over; they were delighted with its contents; mistook all the horses for oxen and all the men for women, and exclaimed and tittered with much glee. The priest, who prided himself on superior education, gave me the blandest encouragement, asked me whether I had been to the picture gallery, whether I had been to the neighbouring Bologna (he was very proud of having been there last St. Petronius's day); informed me that that city was the mother of all art, and that the Caracci especially were her most glorious sons, etc., etc. Meanwhile, the rain continued coming down in a steady pour.

"I don't think I shall be able to get home to-night," said the priest, looking through the window into the darkness. "My donkey is the most wonderful donkey in the world—quite a human being. When you say 'Leone, Leone' to him, he kicks up his heels and stands on his hind legs like an acrobat; indeed he does, upon my honour; but I don't believe even he could find his way through this darkness, and the wheels of my gig would infallibly stick in some rut, and where should I be then? I must stay here overnight, no help for that; but I'm sorry for the Signore here, who will find these very poor quarters." *

"Indeed," I said, "I shall be but too happy to stay, if I be sure that I shall be in no one's way."

"In our way! What a notion!" they all cried.

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"That's it," said the priest, particularly proud of the little vehicle he drove, after the droll fashion of Lombard clergymen. "And I'll drive the Signore into town to-morrow morning, and you can bring your cart with the vegetables for the fair."

I paid but little attention to all this; I felt sure I had at length found the object of my search; there, over the way, was the villa; but I seemed almost as far from it as ever, seated in this bright, whitewashed kitchen, among these country folk. The young man asked me timidly, and as a special favour, to make a picture of the girl who was his bride, and very pretty, with laughing, irregular features, and curly crisp golden hair. I took out my pencil and began, I fear not as conscientiously as these good people deserved; but they were enchanted, and stood in a circle round me, exchanging whispered remarks, while the girl sat all giggling and restless on the large wooden settle.

"What a night!" exclaimed the old man. "What a bad night, and St. John's Eve too!"

"What has that to do with it?" I asked.

"Why," he answered, "they say that on St. John's night they permit dead people to walk about."

"What rubbish!" cried the priest indignantly; "who ever told you that? What is there about ghosts in the mass book, or in the Archbishop's pastorals, or in the Holy Fathers of the Church?" and he raised his voice to inquisitorial dignity.

"You may say what you like," answered the old man doggedly; "it's true none the less. I've never seen anything myself, and perhaps the Archbishop hasn't either, but I know people who have."

The priest was about to fall upon him with a deluge of arguments in dialect, when I interrupted.

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"To whom does that large house over the way belong?" I waited with anxiety for an answer.

"It belongs to the *Avvocato* Bargellini," said the woman with great deference, and they proceeded to inform me that they were his tenants, his *contadini* having charge of all the property belonging to the house; that the *Avvocato* Bargellini was immensely rich and immensely learned.

"An encyclopædic man!" burst out the priest; "he knows everything, law, art, geography, mathematics, numismatics, gymnastics!" And he waved his hand between each branch of knowledge. I was disappointed.

"Is it inhabited?" I asked.

"No," they answered, no one has ever lived in it. "The *Avvocato* bought it twenty years ago from the heir of a certain Marchese Negri who died very poor."

"A Marchese Negri?" I exclaimed; then, after all, I was right.

"But why is it not inhabited, and since when?"

"Oh, since—since always—no one has ever lived in it since the Marchese Negri's grandfather. It is all going to pieces; we keep our garden tools and a few sacks there, but there is no living there—there are no windows or shutters."

"But why doesn't the *Avvocato* patch it up?" I persisted. "It seems a very fine house."

The old man was going to answer, but the priest glanced at him and answered quickly—

"The position in these fields is unhealthy."

"Unhealthy!" cried the old man angrily, much annoyed at the priest's interference. "Unhealthy! why, haven't I lived here these sixty years, and not one of us has had a headache? Unhealthy, indeed! No, the house is a bad house to live in, that's what it is!"

"This is very odd," I said, "surely there must be ghosts?" and I tried to laugh.

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The word *ghosts* acted like magic; like all Italian peasants, they loudly disclaimed such a thing when questioned, although they would accidentally refer to it themselves.

"Ghosts! Ghosts!" they cried, "surely the Signore does not believe in such trash? Rats there are and in plenty. Do ghosts gnaw the chestnuts, and steal the Indian corn?"

Even the old man, who had seemed inclined to be ghostly from rebellion to the priest, was now thoroughly on his guard, and not a word on the subject could be extracted from him. They did not wish to talk about ghosts, and I for my part did not want to hear about them; for in my present highly wrought, imaginative mood, an apparition in a winding sheet, a clanking of chains, and all the authorised ghostly manifestations seemed in the highest degree disgusting, my mind was too much haunted to be intruded on by vulgar spectres, and as I mechanically sketched the giggling, blushing little peasant girl, and looked up in her healthy, rosy, sunburnt face, peeping from beneath a gaudy silk kerchief, my mental eyes were fixed on a very different face, which I saw as distinctly as hers—that dark yearning face with the strange red lips and the lightly powdered locks. The peasants and the priest went on chattering gaily, running from one topic to another—the harvest, the vines, the next day's fair; politics the most fantastic, scraps of historical lore even more astounding, rattling on unceasingly, with much good humour, the most astonishing ignorance of facts, infantine absurdity, perfect seriousness, and much shrewd sceptical humour. I did my best to join in this conversation, and laughed and joked to the best of my power. The fact is I felt quite happy and serene, for I had little by little made up my mind to an absurd step, either babyish in the extreme or foolhardy to the

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utmost, but which I contemplated with perfect coolness and assurance, as one sometimes does hazardous or foolish courses which gratify a momentary whim. I had at length found the house; I would pass the night there.

I must have been in violent mental excitement, but the excitement was so uniform and unimpeded as to seem almost regular; I felt as if it were quite natural to live in an atmosphere of weirdness and adventure, and I was firm in my purpose. At length came the moment for action: the women put by their work, the old man shook the ashes out of his pipe; they looked at each other as if not knowing how to begin. The priest, who had just re-entered from giving his wondrous donkey some hay, made himself their spokesman—

“Ahem!” he cleared his throat; “the Signore must excuse the extreme simplicity of these uneducated rustics, and bear in mind that as they are unaccustomed to the luxuries of cities, and have, moreover, to be up by day break in order to attend to their agricultural——”

“Yes, yes,” I answered, smiling, “I understand. They want to go to bed, and they are quite right. I must beg you all to forgive my having thoughtlessly kept you up so late.” How was I now to proceed? I scarcely understood.

“Keep them up late? Oh, not at all, they had been but too much honoured,” they cried.

“Well,” said the priest, who was growing sleepy, “of course there is no returning through this rain; the lanes are too unsafe; besides, the city gates are locked. Come, what can we do for the Signore? Can we make him up a bed here? I will go and sleep with our old Maso,” and he tapped the young man’s shoulder.

The women were already starting off for pillows, and mattresses, and what not; but I stopped them.

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"On no account," I said. "I will not encroach upon your hospitality. I can sleep quite comfortably over the way—in the large house."

"Over the way? In the big house?" they cried, all together. "The Signore sleep in the big house? Oh, never, never! Impossible."

"Rather than that, I'll harness my donkey and drive the Signore through the mud and rain and darkness; that I will, *corpo di Bacco*," cried the little, red-faced priest.

"But why not?" I answered, determined not to be balked. "I can get a splendid night's rest over the way. Why shouldn't I?"

"Never, never!" they answered in a chorus of expostulation.

"But since there are no ghosts there," I protested, trying to laugh, "what reason is there against it?"

"Oh, as to ghosts," put in the priest, "I promise you there are none. I snap my fingers at ghosts!"

"Well," I persisted, "you won't tell me that the rats will mistake me for a sack of chestnuts and eat me up, will you? Come, give me the key." I was beginning to believe in the use of a little violence. "Which is it?" I asked, seeing a bunch hanging on a nail; "is it this one?—or this one? *Via!* tell me which it is."

The old man seized hold of the keys. "You must not sleep there," he said, very positively. "It's no use trying to hide it. That house is no house for a Christian to sleep in. A bad thing happened there once—some one was murdered; that is why no one will live in it. It's no use to say *No, Abate*," and he turned contemptuously towards the priest. "There are evil things in that house."

"Ghosts?" I cried, laughing, and trying to force the keys from him.

"Not exactly ghosts," he answered; "but—the devil is sometimes in that house."

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"Indeed!" I exclaimed, quite desperate. "That is just what I want. I have to paint a picture of him fighting with a saint of ours who once pulled his nose with a pair of tongs, and I am overjoyed to do his portrait from the life."

They did not well understand; they suspected I was mad, and so, truly, I was.

"Let him have his way," grumbled the old man; "he is a headstrong boy—let him go and see and hear all he will."

"For heaven's sake, Signore!" entreated the women.

"Is it possible, Signore Forestiere, that you can be serious?" protested the priest, with his hand on my arm.

"Indeed I am," I answered; "you shall hear all I have seen to-morrow morning. I'll throw my black paint at the devil if he won't sit still while I paint him."

"Paint the devil! is he mad?" whispered the women, aghast.

I had got hold of the keys. "Is this it?" I asked, pointing to a heavy, handsomely-wrought, but very rusty key.

The old man nodded.

I took it off the ring. The women, although extremely terrified by my daring, were secretly delighted at the prospect of a good story the next morning. One of them gave me a large two-wicked kitchen lamp, with snuffers and tweezers chained to its tall stand; another brought an immense rose-coloured umbrella, the young man produced a large mantle lined with green and a thick horsecloth; they would have brought a mattress and blankets if I had let them.

"You insist on going?" asked the priest. "Think how wretchedly cold and damp it must be over there!"

"Do, pray, reflect, Signore!" entreated the young women.

"Haven't I told you I am engaged to paint the devil's

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portrait?" I answered, and, drawing the bolt, and opening the umbrella, I dashed out of the cottage.

"Gesù Maria!" cried the women; "to go there on such a night as this!"

"To sleep on the floor!" exclaimed the priest; "what a man, what a man!"

"E matto, è matto! he is mad!" they all joined, and shut the door.

I dashed across the flood before the door, unlocked the iron gate, walked quickly through the dark and wet up the avenue of moaning poplars. A sudden flash of lightning, broad, pink, and enduring, permitted me to see the house, like an immense stranded ship or huge grim skeleton, looming in the darkness.

I ran up the steps, unlocked the door, and gave it a violent shake.

I V

I gave a vigorous push to the old, rotten door; it opened, creaking, and I entered a vast, lofty hall, the entrance saloon of the noble old villa. As I stepped forward cautiously, I heard a cutting, hissing sound, and something soft and velvety brushed against my cheek. I stepped backwards and held up the lamp: it was only an owl whom the light had scared, it hooted dully as it regained its perch. The rain fell sullen and monotonous; the only other sound was that of my footsteps waking the echoes of the huge room. I looked about as much as the uncertain light of my two-wicked lamp permitted; the shiny marble pavement was visible only in a few places; dust had formed a thick crust over it, and everywhere yellow maize seed was strewn about. In the middle were some broken chairs—tall, gaunt chairs, with remains of gilding and brocade, and some small wooden ones with

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their ragged straw half pushed out. Against a large oaken table rested some sacks of corn; in the corners were heaps of chestnuts and of green and yellow silkworm cocoons, hoes, spades, and other garden implements; roots and bulbs strewn the floor; the whole place was full of a vague, musty smell of decaying wood and plaster, of earth, of drying fruit and silkworms. I looked up; the rain battered in through the unglazed windows and poured in a stream over some remains of tracery and fresco; I looked higher, at the bare mouldering rafters. Thus I stood while the rain fell heavy and sullen, and the water splashed down outside from the roof; there I stood in the desolate room, in a stupid, unthinking condition. All this solemn, silent decay impressed me deeply, far more than I had expected; all my excitement seemed over, all my whims seemed to have fled.

I almost forgot why I had wished to be here; indeed, why had I? That mad infatuation seemed wholly aimless and inexplicable; this strange, solemn scene was enough in itself. I felt at a loss what to do, or even how to feel; I had the object of my wish, all was over. I was in the house; further I neither ventured to go nor dared to think of; all the dare-devil courting of the picturesque and the supernatural which had hitherto filled me was gone; I felt like an intruder, timid and humble—an intruder on solitude and ruin.

I spread the horse-cloth on the floor, placed the lamp by my side, wrapped myself in the peasant's cloak, leaned my head on a broken chair and looked up listlessly at the bare rafters, listening to the dull falling rain and to the water splashing from the roof; thoughts or feelings I appeared to have none.

How long I remained thus I cannot tell; the minutes seemed hours in this vigil, with nothing but the spluttering

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and flickering of the lamp within, the monotonous splash without; lying all alone, awake but vacant, in the vast crumbling hall.

I can scarcely tell whether suddenly or gradually I began to perceive, or thought I perceived, faint and confused sounds issuing I knew not whence. What they were I could not distinguish; all I knew was that they were distinct from the drop and splash of the rain. I raised myself on my elbow and listened; I took out my watch and pressed the repeater to assure myself I was awake: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve tremulous ticks. I sat up and listened more intently, trying to separate the sounds from those of the rain outside. The sounds—silvery, sharp, but faint—seemed to become more distinct. Were they approaching, or was I awaking? I rose and listened, holding my breath. I trembled; I took up the lamp and stepped forward; I waited a moment, listening again. There could be no doubt the light, metallic sounds proceeded from the interior of the house; they were notes, the notes of some instrument. I went on cautiously. At the end of the hall was a crazy, gilded, battered door up some steps; I hesitated before opening it, for I had a vague, horrible fear of what might be behind it. I pushed it open gently and by degrees, and stood on the threshold, trembling and breathless. There was nothing save a dark empty room, and then another; they had the cold, damp, feeling and smell of a crypt. I passed through them slowly, startling the bats with my light; and the sounds, the sharp, metallic chords became more and more distinct; and as they did so, the vague, numbing terror seemed to gain more and more hold on me. I came to a broad spiral staircase, of which the top was lost in the darkness, my lamp shedding a flickering light on the lower steps. The sounds were now quite distinct, the light, sharp, silvery sounds

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of a harpsichord or spinet; they fell clear and vibrating into the silence of the crypt-like house. A cold perspiration covered my forehead; I seized hold of the banisters of the stairs, and little by little dragged myself up them like an inert mass. There came a chord, and delicately, insensibly there glided into the modulations of the instrument the notes of a strange, exquisite voice. It was of a wondrous sweet, thick, downy quality, neither limpid nor penetrating, but with a vague, drowsy charm, that seemed to steep the soul in enervating bliss; but, together with this charm, a terrible cold seemed to sink into my heart. I crept up the stairs, listening and panting. On the broad landing was a folding, gilded door, through whose interstices issued a faint glimmer of light, and from behind it proceeded the sounds. By the side of the door, but higher up, was one of those oval, ornamental windows called in French "*œil de bœuf*"; an old broken table stood beneath it. I summoned up my courage and, clambering on to the unsteady table, raised myself on tiptoe to the level of the window and, trembling, peeped through its dust-dimmed glass. I saw into a large, lofty room, the greater part of which was hidden in darkness, so that I could distinguish only the outline of the heavily-curtained windows, and of a screen, and of one or two ponderous chairs. In the middle was a small, inlaid harpsichord, on which stood two wax lights, shedding a bright reflection on the shining marble floor, and forming a pale, yellowish mass of light in the dark room. At the harpsichord, turned slightly away from me, sat a figure in the dress of the end of the last* century—a long, pale lilac coat, and pale green waistcoat, and lightly-powdered hair gathered into a black silk bag; a deep amber-coloured silk cloak was thrown over the chairback. He was singing intently, and accompanying himself on the harpsichord,

* Written before 1880.

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his back turned towards the window at which I was. I stood spellbound, incapable of moving, as if all my blood were frozen and my limbs paralysed, almost insensible, save that I saw and I heard, saw and heard him alone. The wonderful sweet, downy voice glided lightly and dexterously through the complicated mazes of the song; it rounded off ornament after ornament, it swelled imperceptibly into glorious, hazy magnitude, and diminished, dying gently away from a high note to a lower one, like a weird, mysterious sigh; then it leaped into a high, clear, triumphant note, and burst out into a rapid, luminous shake.

For a moment he took his hands off the keys, and turned partially round. My eyes caught his: they were the deep, soft, yearning eyes of the portrait at Fa Diesis's.

At that moment a shadow was interposed between me and the lights, and instantly, by whom or how I know not, they were extinguished, and the room left in complete darkness; at the same instant the modulation was broken off unfinished; the last notes of the piece changed into a long, shrill, quivering cry; there was a sound of scuffling and suppressed voices, the heavy dead thud of a falling body, a tremendous crash, and another long, vibrating, terrible cry. The spell was broken, I started up, leaped from the table, and rushed to the closed door of the room; I shook its gilded panels twice and thrice in vain; I wrenched them asunder with a tremendous effort, and entered.

The moonlight fell in a broad, white sheet through a hole in the broken roof, filling the desolate room with a vague, greenish light. It was empty. Heaps of broken tiles and plaster lay on the floor; the water trickled down the stained wall and stagnated on the pavement; a broken fallen beam lay across the middle; and there, solitary and abandoned in the midst of the room, stood an open harpsi-

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chord, its cover encrusted with dust and split from end to end, its strings rusty and broken, its yellow keyboard thick with cobweb; the greenish-white light falling straight upon it.

I was seized with an irresistible panic; I rushed out, caught up the lamp which I had left on the landing, and dashed down the staircase, never daring to look behind me, nor to the right or the left, as if something horrible and undefinable were pursuing me, that long, agonized cry continually ringing in my ears. I rushed on through the empty, echoing rooms and tore open the door of the large entrance hall—there, at least, I might be safe—when, just as I entered it, I slipped, my lamp fell and was extinguished, and I fell down, down, I knew not where, and lost consciousness.

When I came to my senses, gradually and vaguely, I was lying at the extremity of the vast entrance hall of the crumbling villa, at the foot of some steps, the fallen lamp by my side. I looked round all dazed and astonished; the white morning light was streaming into the hall. How had I come there? what had happened to me? Little by little I recollected, and as the recollection returned, so also returned my fear, and I rose quickly. I pressed my hand to my aching head, and drew it back stained with a little blood. I must, in my panic, have forgotten the steps and fallen, so that my head had struck against the sharp base of a column. I wiped off the blood, took the lamp and the cloak and horse-cloth, which lay where I had left them, spread on the dust-encrusted marble floor, amidst the sacks of flour and the heaps of chestnuts, and staggered through the room, not well aware whether I was really awake. At the doorway I paused and looked back once more on the great bare hall, with its mouldering rafters and decaying frescoes, the heaps of rubbish and garden implements, its sad, solemn ruin. I opened the

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door and went out on to the long flight of steps before the house, and looked wonderingly at the serenely lovely scene. The storm had passed away, leaving only a few hazy white clouds in the blue sky; the soaking earth steamed beneath the already strong sun; the yellow corn was beaten down and drenched, the maize and vine leaves sparkled with rain drops, the tall green hemp gave out its sweet, fresh scent. Before me lay the broken-up garden, with its overgrown box hedges, its immense decorated lemon vases, its spread out silkworm mats, its tangle of weeds and vegetables and flowers, further, the waving green plain with its avenues of tall poplars stretching in all directions, and from its midst rose the purple and grey walls and roofs and towers of the old town; hens were cackling about in search of worms in the soft moist earth, and the deep, clear sounds of the great cathedral bell floated across the fields. Looking down on all this fresh, lovely scene, it struck me, more vividly than ever before, how terrible it must be to be cut off for ever from all this, to lie blind and deaf and motionless mouldering underground. The idea made me shudder and shrink from the decaying house; I ran down to the road; the peasants were there, dressed in their gayest clothes, red, blue, cinnamon, and pea-green, busy piling vegetables into a light cart, painted with vine wreaths and souls in the flames of purgatory. A little further, at the door of the white, arcaded farmhouse, with its sundial and vine trellis, the jolly little priest was buckling the harness of his wonderful donkey, while one of the girls, mounted on a chair, was placing a fresh wreath of berries and a fresh dripping nosegay before the little faded Madonna shrine. When they saw me, they all cried out and came eagerly to meet me.

"Well!" asked the priest, "did you see any ghosts?"

"Did you do the devil's picture?" laughed the girl.

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I shook my head with a forced smile.

"Why!" exclaimed the lad, "the Signore has hurt his forehead. How could that have happened?"

"The lamp went out and I stumbled against a sharp corner," I answered hastily.

They noticed that I seemed pale and ill, and attributed it to my fall. One of the women ran into the house and returned with a tiny, bulb-shaped glass bottle, filled with some greenish fluid.

"Rub some of this into the cut," she directed; "this is infallible, it will cure any wound. It is some holy oil more than a hundred years old, left us by our grandmother."

I shook my head, but obeyed and rubbed some of the queer smelling green stuff on to the cut, without noticing any particularly miraculous effect.

They were going to the fair; when the cart was well stocked, they all mounted on to its benches, till it tilted upwards with the weight; the lad touched the shaggy old horse and off they rattled, waving their hats and handkerchiefs at me. The priest courteously offered me a seat beside him in his gig; I accepted mechanically, and off we went, behind the jingling cart of the peasants, through the muddy lanes, where the wet boughs bent over us, and we brushed the drops off the green hedges. The priest was highly talkative, but I scarcely heard what he said, for my head ached and reeled. I looked back at the deserted villa, a huge dark mass in the shining green fields of hemp and maize, and shuddered.

"You are unwell," said the priest; "you must have taken cold in that confounded damp old hole."

We entered the town, crowded with carts and peasants, passed through the market place, with its grand old buildings all festooned with tin ware and onions and coloured stuffs, and what not; and he set me down at my

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inn, where the sign of the three pilgrims swings over the door.

"Good-bye, good-bye! *a rivederci*! to our next meeting!" he cried.

"*A rivederci*!" I answered faintly. I felt numb and sick; I paid my bill and sent off my luggage at once. I longed to be out of M——; I knew instinctively that I was on the eve of a bad illness, and my only thought was to reach Venice while I yet could.

I proved right; the day after my arrival at Venice the fever seized me and kept fast hold of me many a week.

"That's what comes of remaining in Rome until July!" cried all my friends, and I let them continue in their opinion.

Winthrop paused, and remained for a moment with his head between his hands; none of us made any remark, for we were at a loss what to say.

"That air—the one I had heard that night," he added after a moment, "and its opening words, those on the portrait, 'Sei Regina, io Pastor sono,' remained deep in my memory. I took every opportunity of discovering whether such an air really existed; I asked lots of people, and ransacked half a dozen musical archives. I did find an air, even more than one, with those words, which appear to have been set by several composers; but on trying them over at the piano they proved tally different from the one in my mind. The consequence naturally was that, as the impression of the adventure grew fainter, I began to doubt whether it had not been all a delusion, a nightmare phantasm, due to over-excitement and fever, due to the morbid, vague desire for something strange and supernatural. Little by little I settled down in this idea, regarding the whole story as an hallucination. As to the air, I couldn't explain that, I shuffled it off half unexplained and tried to forget it. But now, on suddenly

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hearing that very same air from you—on being assured of its existence outside my imagination—the whole scene has returned to me in all its vividness, and I feel compelled to believe. Can I do otherwise? Tell me? Is it reality or fiction? At any rate,” he added, rising and taking his hat, and trying to speak more lightly, “will you forgive my begging you never to let me hear that piece again?”

“Be assured you shall not,” answered the Countess, pressing his hand; “it makes even me feel a little uncomfortable now; besides, the comparison would be too much to my disadvantage. Ah! my dear Mr. Winthrop, do you know, I think I would almost spend a night in the Villa Negri, in order to hear a song of Cimarosa’s time sung by a singer of the last century.”

“I knew you wouldn’t believe a word of it,” was Winthrop’s only reply.

Dionea

From the Letters of Doctor Alessandro De Rosis to the
Lady Evelyn Savelli, Princess of Sabina.

MONTEMIRTO LIGURE, *June 29, 1873.*

I take immediate advantage of the generous offer of your Excellency (allow an old Republican who has held you on his knees to address you by that title sometimes, 'tis so appropriate) to help our poor people. I never expected to come a-begging so soon. For the olive crop has been unusually plenteous. We semi-Genoese don't pick the olives unripe, like our Tuscan neighbours, but let them grow big and black, when the young fellows go into the trees with long reeds and shake them down on the grass for the women to collect—a pretty sight which your Excellency must see some day: the grey trees with the brown, barefoot lads craning, balanced in the branches, and the turquoise sea as background just beneath. . . . That sea of ours—it is all along of it that I wish to ask for money. Looking up from my desk, I see the sea through the window, deep below and beyond the olive woods, bluish-green in the sunshine and veined with violet under the cloud-bars, like one of your Ravenna mosaics spread out as pavement for the world: a wicked sea, wicked in its loveliness, wickeder than your grey northern ones, and from which must have arisen in times gone by (when Phœnicians or Greeks built the temples at Lerici and Porto Venere) a baleful goddess of beauty, a Venus Verticordia, but in the bad sense of the word, overwhelming men's lives in sudden darkness like that squall of last week.

To come to the point. I want you, dear Lady Evelyn, to promise me some money, a great deal of money, as much

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as would buy you a little mannish cloth frock—for the complete bringing-up, until years of discretion, of a young stranger whom the sea has laid upon our shore. Our people, kind as they are, are very poor, and over-burdened with children; besides, they have got a certain repugnance for this poor little waif, cast up by that dreadful storm, and who is doubtless a heathen, for she had no little crosses or scapulars on, like proper Christian children. So, being unable to get any of our women to adopt the child, and having an old bachelor's terror of my house-keeper, I have bethought me of certain nuns, holy women, who teach little girls to say their prayers and make lace close by here; and of your dear Excellency to pay for the whole business.

Poor little brown mite! She was picked up after the storm (such a set-out of ship-models and votive candles as that storm must have brought the Madonna at Porta Venere!) on a strip of sand between the rocks of our castle: the thing was really miraculous, for this coast is like a shark's jaw, and the bits of sand are tiny and far between. She was lashed to a plank, swaddled up close in outlandish garments; and when they brought her to me they thought she must certainly be dead: a little girl of four or five, decidedly pretty, and as brown as a berry, who, when she came to, shook her head to show she understood no kind of Italian, and jabbered some half-intelligible Eastern jabber, a few Greek words embedded in I know not what; the Superior of the College De propagandâ Fidé would be puzzled to know. The child appears to be the only survivor from a ship which must have gone down in the great squall, and whose timbers have been strewing the bay for some days past; no one at Spezia or in any of our ports knows anything about her, but she was seen, apparently making for Porto Venere, by some of our sardine-fishers: a big, lumbering craft, with

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eyes painted on each side of the prow, which, as you know, is a peculiarity of Greek boats. She was sighted for the last time off the island of Palmaria, entering, with all sails spread, right into the thick of the storm-darkness. No bodies, strangely enough, have been washed ashore.

July 10.

I have received the money, dear Donna Evelina. There was tremendous excitement down at San Massimo when the carrier came in with a registered letter, and I was sent for, in presence of all the village authorities, to sign my name on the postal register.

The child has already been settled some days with the nuns; such dear little nuns (nuns always go straight to the heart of an old priest-hater and conspirator against the Pope you know), dressed in brown robes and close, white caps, with an immense round straw-hat flapping behind their heads like a nimbus: they are called Sisters of the Stigmata, and have a convent and school at San Massimo, a little way inland, with an untidy garden full of lavender and cherry-trees. Your *protégée* has already half set the convent, the village, the Episcopal See, the Order of St. Francis, by the ears. First, because nobody could make out whether or not she had been christened. The question was a grave one, for it appears (as your uncle-in-law, the Cardinal, will tell you) that it is almost equally undesirable to be christened twice over as not to be christened at all. The first danger was finally decided upon as the less terrible; but the child, they say, had evidently been baptized before, and knew that the operation ought not to be repeated, for she kicked and plunged and yelled like twenty little devils, and positively would not let the holy water touch her. The Mother Superior, who always took for granted that the baptism had taken place before, says that the child was quite right, and that

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Heaven was trying to prevent a sacrilege; but the priest and the barber's wife, who had to hold her, think the occurrence fearful, and suspect the little girl of being a Protestant. Then the question of the name. Pinned to her clothes—striped Eastern things, and that kind of crinkled silk stuff they weave in Crete and Cyprus—was a piece of parchment, a scapular we thought at first, but which was found to contain only the name *Diorea*—Dionea, as they pronounce it here. The question was, Could such a name be fitly borne by a young lady at the Convent of the Stigmata? Half the population here have names quite as unchristian—Norma, Odoacer, Archimedes—my housemaid is called Themis—but Dionea seemed to scandalise every one, perhaps because these good folk had a mysterious instinct that the name is derived from Dione, one of the loves of Father Zeus, and mother of no less a lady than the goddess Venus. The child was very near being called Maria, although there are already twenty-three other Marias, Mariettas, Mariuccias, and so forth at the convent. But the sister-book-keeper, who apparently detests monotony, bethought her to look out Dionea first in the Calendar, which proved useless; and then in a big vellum-bound book, printed at Venice in 1625, called "*Flos Sanctorum, or Lives of the Saints, by Father Ribadeneira, S.J., with the addition of such Saints as have no assigned place in the Almanack, otherwise called the Movable or Extravagant Saints.*" The zeal of Sister Anna Maddalena has been rewarded, for there, among the Extravagant Saints, sure enough, with a border of palm-branches and hour-glasses, stands the name of Saint Dionea, Virgin and Martyr, a lady of Antioch, put to death by the Emperor Decius. I know your Excellency's taste for historical information, so I forward this item. But I fear, dear Lady Evelyn, I fear that the heavenly patroness of your little sea-waif was a much more extravagant saint than that.

Dionea

December 21, 1879.

Many thanks, dear Donna Evelina, for the money for Dionea's schooling. Indeed, it was not wanted yet: the accomplishments of young ladies are taught at a very moderate rate at Montemirto: and as to clothes, which you mention, a pair of wooden clogs, with pretty red tips, costs sixty-five centimes, and ought to last three years, if the owner is careful to carry them on her head in a neat parcel when out walking, and to put them on again only on entering the village. The Mother Superior is greatly overcome by your Excellency's munificence towards the convent, and much perturbed at being unable to send you a specimen of your *protégée's* skill, exemplified in an embroidered pocket-handkerchief or a pair of mittens; but the fact is that poor Dionea *has* no skill. "We will pray to the Madonna and St. Francis to make her more worthy," remarked the Superior. Perhaps, however, your Excellency, who is, I fear but a Pagan woman (for all the Savelli Popes and St. Andrew Savelli's miracles), and insufficiently appreciative of embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs, will be quite as satisfied to hear that Dionea, instead of skill, has got the prettiest face of any little girl in Montemirto. She is tall, for her age (she is eleven), quite wonderfully well proportioned and extremely strong: of all the convent-fu'll she is the only one for whom I have never been called in. The features are very regular, the hair black, and despite all the good Sisters' efforts to keep it smooth like a Chinaman's, beautifully curly. I am glad she should be pretty, for she will more easily find a husband; and also because it seems fitting that your *protégée* should be beautiful. Unfortunately her character is not so satisfactory: she hates learning, sewing, washing up the dishes, all equally. I am sorry to say she shows no natural piety. Her companions detest her, and the nuns, although they admit that she

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is not exactly naughty, seem to feel her as a dreadful thorn in the flesh. She spends hours and hours on the terrace overlooking the sea (her great desire, she confided to me, is to get to the sea—to get *back to the sea*, as she expressed it), and lying in the garden, under the big myrtle-bushes, and, in spring and summer, under the rose-hedge. The nuns say that rose-hedge and that myrtle-bush are growing a great deal too big, one would think from Dionea's lying under them; the fact, I suppose, has drawn attention to them. "That child makes all the useless weeds grow," remarked Sister Reparata. Another of Dionea's amusements is playing with pigeons. The number of pigeons she collects about her is quite amazing; you would never have thought that San Massimo or the neighbouring hills contained as many. They flutter down like snowflakes, and strut and swell themselves out, and furl and unfurl their tails, and peck with little sharp movements of their silly, sensual heads and a little throb and gurgle in their throats, while Dionea lies stretched out full length in the sun, putting out her lips, which they come to kiss, and uttering strange, cooing sounds; or hopping about, flapping her arms slowly like wings, and raising her little head with much the same odd gesture as they;—'tis a lovely sight, a thing fit for one of your painters, Burne Jones or Tadema, with the myrtle-bushes all round, the bright, white-washed convent walls behind, the white marble chapel steps (all steps are marble in this Carrara country), and the enamel blue sea through the ilex-branches beyond. But the good Sisters abominate these pigeons, who, it appears, are messy little creatures, and they complain that, were it not that the Reverend Director likes a pigeon in his pot on a holiday, they could not stand the bother of perpetually sweeping the chapel steps and the kitchen threshold all along of those dirty birds. . . .

Dionca

August 6, 1882.

Do not tempt me, dearest Excellency, with your invitations to Rome. I should not be happy there, and do but little honour to your friendship. My many years of exile, of wanderings in northern countries, have made me a little bit into a northern man: I cannot quite get on with my own fellow-countrymen, except with the good peasants and fishermen all round. Besides—forgive the vanity of an old man, who has learned to make triple acrostic sonnets to cheat the days and months at Theresienstadt and Spielberg—I have suffered too much for Italy to endure patiently the sight of little parliamentary cabals and municipal wranglings, although they also are necessary in this day as conspiracies and battles were in mine. I am not fit for your roomful of ministers and learned men and pretty women: the former would think me an ignoramus, and the latter—what would afflict me much more—a pedant. . . . Rather, if your Excellency really wants to show yourself and your children to your father's old *protégée* of Mazzinian times, find a few days to come here next spring. You shall have some very bare rooms with brick floors and white curtains opening out on my terrace; and a dinner of all manner of fish and milk (the white garlic flowers shall be mown away from under the olives lest my cow should eat it) and eggs cooked in herbs plucked in the hedges. Your boys can go and see the big ironclads at Spezia; and you shall come with me up our lanes fringed with delicate ferns and overhung by big olives, and into the fields where the cherry-trees shed their blossoms on to the budding vines, the fig-trees stretching out their little green gloves, where the goats nibble perched on their hind legs, and the cows low in the huts of reeds; and there rise from the ravines, with the gurgle of the brooks, from the cliffs with the boom of the surf, the voices of unseen boys and girls,

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singing about love and flowers and death, just as in the days of Theocritus, whom your learned Excellency does well to read. Has your Excellency ever read Longus, a Greek pastoral novelist? He is a trifle free, a trifle nude for us readers of Zola; but the old French of Amyot has a wonderful charm, and he gives one an idea, as no one else does, how folk lived in such valleys, by such sea-boards, as these in the days when daisy-chains and garlands of roses were still hung on the olive-trees for the nymphs of the grove; when across the bay, at the end of the narrow neck of blue sea, there clung to the marble rocks not a church of Saint Laurence, with the sculptured martyr on his gridiron, but the temple of Venus, protecting her harbour. . . . Yes, dear Lady Evelyn, you have guessed aright. Your old friend has returned to his sins, and is scribbling once more. But no longer at verses or political pamphlets. I am enthralled by a tragic history, the history of the fall of the Pagan Gods. . . . Have you ever read of their wanderings and disguises, in my friend Heine's little book?

And if you come to Montemirto, you shall see also your *protégée*, of whom you ask for news. It has just missed being disastrous. Poor Dionea! I fear that early voyage, tied to the spar did no good to her wits, poor little waif! There has been a fearful row; and it has required all my influence, and all the awfulness of your Excellency's name, and the Papacy, and the Holy Roman Empire, to prevent her expulsion by the Sisters of the Stigmata. It appears that this mad creature very nearly committed a sacrilege: she was discovered handling in a suspicious manner the Madonna's gala frock and her best veil of *pizzo di Cantù*, a gift of the late Marchioness Violante Vigalena of Fornovo. One of the orphans, Zaira Barsanti, whom they call the Rossaccia, even pretends to have surprised Dionea as she was about to adorn her wicked

Dionea

little person with these sacred garments; and, on another occasion, when Dionea had been sent to pass some oil and sawdust over the chapel floor (it was the eve of Easter of the Roses), to have discovered her seated on the edge of the altar, in the very place of the Most Holy Sacrament. I was sent for in hot haste, and had to assist at an ecclesiastical council in the convent parlour, where Dionea appeared, rather out of place, an amazing little beauty, dark, lithe, with an odd, ferocious gleam in her eyes, and a still odder smile, tortuous, serpentine, like that of Leonardo da Vinci's women, among the plaster images of St. Francis, and the glazed and framed samplers before the little statue of the Virgin, which wears in summer a kind of mosquito-curtain to guard it from the flies, who, as you know, are creatures of Satan.

Speaking of Satan, does your Excellency know that on the inside of our little convent door, just above the little perforated plate of metal (like the rose of a watering-pot) through which the Sister-portress peeps and talks, is pasted a printed form, an arrangement of holy names and texts in triangles, and the stigmatised hands of St. Francis, and a variety of other devices, for the purpose, as is explained in a special notice, of baffling the Evil One, and preventing his entrance into that building? Had you seen Dionea, and the stolid, contemptuous way which she took, without attempting to refute, the various shocking allegations against her, your Excellency would have reflected, as I did, that the door in question must have been accidentally absent from the premises, perhaps at the joiner's for repair, the day that your *protégée* first penetrated into the convent. The ecclesiastical tribunal, consisting of the Mother Superior, three Sisters, the Capuchin Director, and your humble servant (who vainly attempted to be Devil's advocate), sentenced Dionea, among other things, to make the sign of the cross twenty-six times on

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the bare floor with her tongue. Poor little child! One might almost expect that, as happened when Dame Venus scratched her hand on the thorn-bush, red roses should sprout up between the fissures of the dirty old bricks.

October 14, 1883.

You ask whether, now that the Sisters let Dionea go and do half a day's service now and then in the village, and that Dionea is a grown-up creature, she does not set the place by the ears with her beauty. The people here are quite aware of its existence. She is already dubbed *La bella Dionea*; but that does not bring her any nearer getting a husband, although your Excellency's generous offer of a wedding-portion is well known throughout the district of San Massimo and Montemirto. None of our boys, peasants or fishermen, seem to hang on her steps; and if they turn round to stare and whisper as she goes by straight and dainty in her wooden clogs, with the pitcher of water or the basket of linen on her beautiful crisp dark head, it is, I remark, with an expression rather of fear than of love. The women, on their side, make horns with their fingers as she passes, and as they sit by her side in the convent chapel; but that seems natural. My housekeeper tells me that down in the village she is regarded as possessing the evil eye and bringing love misery. "You mean," I said, "that a glance from her is too much for our lads' peace of mind." Veneranda shook her head, and explained, with the deference and contempt with which she always mentions any of her countryfolk's superstitions to me, that the matter is different: it's not with her they are in love (they would be afraid of her eye), but wherever she goes the young people must needs fall in love with each other, and usually where it is far from desirable. "You know Sora Luisa, the blacksmith's widow? Well, Dionea did a *half-service* for her last

Dionea

month, to prepare for the wedding of Luisa's daughter. Well, now, the girl must say, forsooth! that she won't have Pieriho of Lerici any longer, but will have that ragamuffin Wooden Pipe from Solara, or go into a convent. And the girl changed her mind the very day that Dionea had come into the house. Then there is the wife of Pippo, the coffee-house keeper; they say she is carrying on with one of the coastguards, and Dionea helped her to do her washing six weeks ago. The son of Sor Temistocle has cut off a finger to avoid the conscription, because he is mad about his cousin and afraid of being taken for a soldier; and it is a fact that some of the shirts which were made for him at the Stigmata had been sewn by Dionea; " . . . and thus a perfect string of love misfortunes, enough to make a little "Decameron," I assure you, and all laid to Dionea's account. Certain it is that the people of San Massimo are terribly afraid of Dionea. . . .

July 17, 1884.

Dionea's strange influence seems to be extending in a terrible way. I am almost beginning to think that our folk are correct in their fear of the young witch. I used to think, as physician to a convent, that nothing was more erroneous than all the romancings of Diderot and Schubert (your Excellency sang *his* "You Nun" once: do you recollect, just before your marriage?), and that no more humdrum creature existed than one of our little nuns, with their pink baby faces under their tight white caps. It appeared the romancing was more correct than the prose. Unknown things have sprung up in these good Sisters' hearts, as unknown flowers have sprung up among the myrtle-bushes and the rose-hedge which Dionea lies under. Did I ever mention to you a certain little Sister Giuliana, who professed only two years ago?—a funny rose and white little creature presiding over the in-

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firmly, as prosaic a little saint as ever kissed a crucifix or scoured a saucepan. Well, Sister Giuliana has disappeared, and the same day has disappeared also a sailor-boy from the port.

August 20, 1884.

The case of Sister Giuliana seems to have been but the beginning of an extraordinary love epidemic at the Convent of the Stigmata: the elder schoolgirls have to be kept under lock and key lest they should talk over the wall in the moonlight, or steal out to the little hunchback who writes love-letters at a penny a-piece, beautiful flourishes and all, under the portico by the Fish-market. I wonder does that wicked little Dionea, whom no one pays court to, smile (her lips like a Cupid's bow or a tiny snake's curves) as she calls the pigeons down around her, or lies fondling the cats under the myrtle-bush, when she sees the pupils going about with swollen, red eyes; the poor little nuns taking fresh penances on the cold chapel flags; and hears the long-drawn guttural vowels, *amore* and *morte* and *mio bene*, which rise up of an evening, with the boom of the surf and the scent of the lemon-flowers, as the young men wander up and down, arm-in-arm, twanging their guitars along the moonlit lanes under the olives?

October 20, 1885.

A terrible, terrible thing has happened! I write to your Excellency with hands all a-tremble; and yet I *must* write, I must speak, or else I shall cry out. Did I ever mention to you Father Domenico of Casoria, the confessor of our Convent of the Stigmata? A young man, tall, emaciated with fasts and vigils, but handsome like the monk playing the virginal in Giorgione's "Concert," and under his brown serge still the most stalwart fellow of the country all round? One has heard of men struggling with the tempter. Well, well, Father Domenico had

struggled as hard as any of the Anchorites recorded by St. Jerome, and he had conquered. I never knew anything comparable to the angelic serenity of gentleness of this victorious soul. I don't like monks, but I loved Father Domenico. I might have been his father, easily, yet I always felt a certain shyness and awe of him; and yet men have accounted me a clean-lived man in my generation; but I felt, whenever I approached him, a poor worldly creature, debased by the knowledge of so many mean and ugly things. Of late Father Domenico had seemed to me less calm than usual: his eyes had grown strangely bright, and red spots had formed on his salient cheekbones. One day last week, taking his hand, I felt his pulse flutter, and all his strength as it were, liquefy under my touch. "You are ill," I said. "You have fever, Father Domenico. You have been overdoing yourself—some new privation, some new penance. Take care and do not tempt Heaven; remember the flesh is weak." Father Domenico withdrew his hand quickly. "Do not say that," he cried; "the flesh is strong!" and turned away his face. His eyes were glistening and he shook all over. "Some quinine," I ordered. But I felt it was no case for quinine. Prayers might be more useful, and could I have given them he should not have wanted. Last night I was suddenly sent for to Father Domenico's monastery above Montemirto: they told me he was ill, I ran up through the dim twilight of moonbeams and olives with a sinking heart. Something told me my monk was dead. He was lying in a little low whitewashed room; they had carried him there from his own cell in hopes he might still be alive. The windows were wide open; they framed some olive-branches, glistening in the moonlight, and far below, a strip of moonlight sea. When I told them that he was really dead, they brought some tapers and lit them at his head and feet, and placed a crucifix between his hands. "The

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Lord has been pleased to call our poor brother to Him," said the Superior. "A case of apoplexy, my dear Doctor—a case of apoplexy. You will make out the certificate for the authorities." I made out the certificate. It was weak of me. But, after all, why make a scandal? He certainly had no wish to injure the poor monks.

Next day I found the little nuns all in tears. They were gathering flowers to send as a last gift to their confessor. In the convent garden I found Dionea, standing by the side of a big basket of roses, one of the white pigeons perched on her shoulder.

"So," she said, "he has killed himself with charcoal, poor Padre Domenico!"

Something in her tone, her eyes, shocked me.

"God has called to Himself one of His most faithful servants," I said gravely.

Standing opposite this girl, magnificent, radiant in her beauty, before the rose-hedge, with the white pigeons furling and unfurling, strutting and pecking all round, I seemed to see suddenly the whitewashed room of last night, the big crucifix, that poor thin face under the yellow waxlight. I felt glad for Father Domenico; his battle was over.

"Take this to Father Domenico from me," said Dionea, breaking off a twig of myrtle starred over with white blossom; and raising her head with that smile like the twist of a young snake, she sang out in a high guttural voice a strange chant, consisting of the word *Amor—amor—amor*. I took the branch of myrtle and threw it in her face.

January 3, 1886.

It will be difficult to find a place for Dionea, and in this neighbourhood well-nigh impossible. The people associate her somehow with the death of Father Domenico, which has confirmed her reputation of having the evil eye. She

Dionea

left the convent (being now seventeen) some two months back, and is at present gaining her bread working with the masons at our notary's new house at Lerici: the work is hard, but our women often do it, and it is magnificent to see Dionea, in her short white skirt and tight white bodice, mixing the smoking lime with her beautiful strong arms; or, an empty sack drawn over her head and shoulders, walking majestically up the cliff, up the scaffolding with her load of bricks. . . . I am, however, very anxious to get Dionea out of the neighbourhood, because I cannot help dreading the annoyances to which her reputation for the evil eye exposes her, and even some explosion of rage if ever she should lose the indifferent contempt with which she treats them. I hear that one of the rich men of our part of the world, a certain Sor Agostino of Sarzana, who owns a whole flank of marble mountain, is looking out for a maid for his daughter, who is about to be married; kind people and patriarchal in their riches, the old man still sitting down to table with all his servants; and his nephew, who is going to be his son-in-law, a splendid young fellow, who has worked like Jacob, in the quarry and at the saw-mill, for love of his pretty cousin. That whole house is so good, simple, and peaceful, that I hope it may tame down even Dionea. If I do not succeed in getting Dionea this place (and all your Excellency's illustriousness and all my poor eloquence will be needed to counteract the sinister reports attached to our poor little waif), it will be best to accept your suggestion of taking the girl into your household at Rome, since you are curious to see what you call our baleful beauty. I am amused, and a little indignant at what you say about your footman being handsome: Don Juan himself, my dear Lady Evelyn, would be cowed by Dionea. . .

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May 29, 1886.

Here is Dionea back upon our hands once more! but I cannot send her to your Excellency. Is it from living among these peasants and fishing-folk, or is it because, as people pretend, a sceptic is always superstitious? I could not muster courage to send you Dionea, although your boys are still in sailor-clothes and your uncle, the Cardinal, is eighty-four; and as to the Prince, why, he bears the most potent amulet against Dionea's terrible powers in your own dear capricious person. Seriously, there is something eerie in this coincidence. Poor Dionea! I feel sorry for her, exposed to the passion of a once patriarchally respectable old man. I feel even more abashed at the incredible audacity, I should almost say sacrilegious madness, of the vile old creature. But still the coincidence is strange and uncomfortable. Last week the lightning struck a huge olive in the orchard of Sor Agostino's house above Sarzana. Under the olive was Sor Agostino himself, who was killed on the spot; and opposite, not twenty paces off, drawing water from the well, unhurt and calm, was Dionea. It was the end of a sultry afternoon: I was on a terrace in one of those villages of ours, jammed, like some hardy bush, in the gash of a hill-side. I saw the storm rush down the valley, a sudden blackness, and then, like a curse, a flash, a tremendous crash, re-echoed by a dozen hills. "I told him," Dionea said very quietly, when she came to stay with me the next day (for Sor Agostino's family would not have her for another half-minute), "that if he did not leave me alone Heaven would send him an accident."

July 15, 1886.

My book? Oh, dear Donna Evelina, do not make me blush by talking of my book! Do not make an old man, respectable, a Government functionary (communal physi-

Dionea

cian of the district of San Massimo and Montemirto Ligure), confess that he is but a lazy unprofitable dreamer, collecting materials as a child picks hips out of a hedge, only to throw them away, liking them merely for the little occupation of scratching his hands and standing on tiptoe, for their pretty redness. . . . You remember what Balzac says about projecting any piece of work?—“*C'est fumer des cigarettes enchantées.*” . . . Well, well! The data obtainable about the ancient gods in their days of adversity are few and far between: a quotation here and there from the Fathers; two or three legends; Venus reappearing; the persecutions of Apollo in Styria; Proserpina going, in Chaucer, to reign over the fairies; a few obscure religious persecutions in the Middle Ages on the score of Paganism; some strange rites practised till lately in the depths of a Breton forest near Lannion. . . . As to Tannhäuser, he was a real knight, and a sorry one, and a real Minnesinger not of the best. Your Excellency will find some of his poems in Von der Hagen's four immense volumes, but I recommend you to take your notions of Ritter Tannhäuser's poetry rather from Wagner. Certain it is that the Pagan divinities lasted much longer than we suspect, sometimes in their own nakedness, sometimes in the stolen garb of the Madonna or the saints. Who knows whether they do not exist to this day? And, indeed, is it possible they should not? For the awfulness of the deep woods, with their filtered green light, the creak of the swaying, solitary reeds, exists and is Pan; and the blue, starry May night exists, the sough of the waves, the warm wind carrying the sweetness of the lemon-blossoms, the bitterness of the myrtle on our rocks, the distant chant of the boys cleaning out their nets, of the girls sickling the glass under the olives, *Amor—amor—amor*, and all this is the great goddess Venus. And opposite to me, as I write, between the branches of the

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ilexes, across the blue sea, streaked like a Ravenna mosaic with purple and green, shimmer the white houses and walls, the steeple and towers, an enchanted Fata Morgana city, of dim Porto Venere; . . . and I mumble to myself the verse of Catullus, but addressing a greater and more terrible goddess than he did:—

“Procul a mea sit furor omnis, Hera, domo; alios; age incitatos, alios age rabidos.”

March 25, 1887.

Yes; I will do everything in my power for your friends. Are you well-bred folk as well bred as we, Republican *bourgeois*, with the coarse hands (though you once told me mine were psychic hands when the mania of palmistry had not yet been succeeded by that of the Reconciliation between Church and State), I wonder, that you should apologise, you whose father fed me and housed me and clothed me in my exile, for giving me the horrid trouble of hunting for lodgings? It is like you, dear Donna Evelina, to have sent me photographs of my future friend Waldemar's statue. . . . I have no love for modern sculpture, for all the hours I have spent in Gibson's and Dupré's studio: 'tis a dead art we should do better to bury. But your Waldemar has something of the old spirit: he seems to feel the divineness of the mere body, the spirituality of a limpid stream of mere physical life. But why among these statues only men and boys, athletes and fauns? Why only the bust of that thin, delicate-lipped little Madonna wife of his? Why no wide-shouldered Amazon or broad-flanked Aphrodite?

April 10, 1887.

You ask me how poor Dionea is getting on. Not as your Excellency and I ought to have expected when we placed her with the good Sisters of the Stigmata: although I wager that, fantastic and capricious as you are, you would be better pleased (hiding it carefully from that grave side

Dionea

of you which bestows devout little books and carbolic acid upon the indigent) that your *protégée* should be a witch than a serving-maid, a maker of philters rather than a knitter of stockings and sewer of shirts.

A maker of philters. Roughly speaking, that is Dionea's profession. She lives upon the money which I dole out to her (with many useless objurgations) on behalf of your Excellency; and her ostensible employment is mending nets, collecting olives, carrying bricks, and other miscellaneous jobs; but her real status is that of village sorceress. You think our peasants are sceptical? Perhaps they do not believe in thought-reading, mesmerism, and ghosts, like you, dear Lady Evelyn. But they believe very firmly in the evil eye, in magic, and in love-potions. Every one has his little story of this or that which happened to his broth. or cousin or neighbour. My stable-boy and male factotum's brother-in-law, living some years ago in Corsica, was seized with a longing for a dance with his beloved at one of those balls which our peasants give in the winter, when the snow makes leisure in the mountains. A wizard anointed him for money, and straightway he turned into a black cat, and in three bounds was over the seas, at the door of his uncle's cottage, and among the dancers. He caught his beloved by the skirt to draw her attention; but she replied with a kick which sent him squealing back to Corsica. When he returned summer he refused to marry the lady, and carried his left arm in a sling. "You broke it when I came to the Veglia!" he said, and all seemed explained. Another lad, returning from working in the vineyards near Marseilles, was walking up to his native village, high in our hills, one moonlight night. He heard sounds of fiddle and fife from a roadside barn, and saw yellow light from its chinks; and then entering, he found many women dancing, old and young, and among them his affianced. He tried to snatch

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her round the waist for a waltz (they play *Mme. Angot* at our rustic balls), but the girl was unclutchable, and whispered, "Go; for these are witches, who will kill thee; and I am a witch also. Alas! I shall go to hell when I die."

I could tell your Excellency dozens of such stories. But love-philters are among the commonest things to sell and buy. Do you remember the sad little story of Cervantes' Licentiate, who, instead of a love-potion, drank a philter which made him think he was made of glass, fit emblem of a poor mad poet? . . . It is love-philters that Dionea prepares. No; do not misunderstand; they do not give love of her, still less her love. Your seller of love-charms is as cold as ice, as pure as snow. The priest has crusaded against her, and stones have flown at her as she went by from dissatisfied lovers; and the very children, paddling in the sea and making mud-pies in the sand, have put out forefinger and little finger and screamed, "Witch, witch! ugly witch!" as she passed with basket or brick load; but Dionea has only smiled, that snake-like, amused smile, but more ominous than of yore. The other day I determined to seek her and argue with her on the subject of her evil trade. Dionea has a certain regard for me; not, I fancy, a result of gratitude, but rather the recognition of a certain admiration and awe which she inspires in your Excellency's foolish old servant. She has taken up her abode in a deserted hut, built of dried reeds and thatch, such as they keep cows in, among the olives on the cliffs. She was not there, but about the hut pecked some white pigeons, and from it, startling me foolishly with its unexpected sound, came the eerie bleat of her pet goat. . . . Among the olives it was twilight already, with streakings of faded rose in the sky, and faded rose, like long trails of petals, on the distant sea. I clambered down among the myrtle-bushes and came to a little semicircle of yellow sand, between two high and jagged rocks, the place where the sea had

Dionea

deposited Dionea after the wreck. She was seated there on the sand, her bare foot dabbling in the waves; she had twisted a wreath of myrtle and wild roses on her black, crisp hair. Near her was one of our prettiest girls, the Lena of Sor Tullio the blacksmith, with ashy, terrified face under her flowered kerchief. I determined to speak to the child, but without startling her now, for she is a nervous, hysteric little thing. So I sat on the rocks, screened by the myrtle-bushes, waiting till the girl had gone. Dionea, seated listless on the sands, leaned over the sea and took some of its water in the hollow of her hand. "Here," she said to the Lena of Sor Tullio, "fill your bottle with this and give it to drink to Tommasino the Rosebud." Then she set to singing:—

"Love is salt, like sea-water—I drink and I die of this. . . . Water! water! Yet the more I drink, the more I burn. Love! thou art bitter as the seaweed."

April 20, 1887.

Your friends are settled here, dear Lady Evelyn. The house is built in what was once a Genoese fort, growing like a grey spiked aloe out of the marble rocks of our bay; rock and wall (the walls existed long before Genoa was ever heard of) grown almost into a homogeneous mass, delicate grey, stained with black and yellow lichen, and dotted here and there with myrtle-shoots and crimson snapdragon. In what was once the highest enclosure of the fort, where your friend Gertrude watches the maids hanging out the fine white sheets and pillow-cases to dry (a bit of the North, of Hermann and Dorothea transferred to the South), a great twisted fig-tree juts out like an eccentric gargoyle over the sea, and drops its ripe fruit into the deep blue pools. There is but scant furniture in the house, but a great oleander overhangs it, presently to burst into pink splendour; and on all the window-sills,

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even that of the kitchen (such a background of shining brass saucepans Waldemar's wife has made of it!) are pipkins and tubs full of trailing carnations, and tufts of sweet basil and thyme and mignonette. She pleases me most, your Gertrude, although you foretold I should prefer the husband, with her thin white face, a Memling Madonna finished by some Tuscan sculptor, and her long, delicate white hands ever busy, like those of a mediæval lady, with some delicate piece of work; and the strange blue, more limpid than the sky and deeper than the sea, of her rarely lifted glance.

It is in her company that I like Waldemar best; I prefer to the genius that infinitely tender and respectful, I would not say *lover*—yet I have no other word—of his pale wife. He seems to me, when with her, like some fierce, generous, wild thing from the woods, like the lion of Una, tame and submissive to this saint. . . . This tenderness is really very beautiful on the part of that big lion Waldemar, with his odd eyes, as of some wild animal—odd, and, your Excellency remarks, not without a gleam of latent ferocity. I think that hereby hangs the explanation of his never doing any but male figures: the female figure, he says (and your Excellency must hold him responsible, not me, for such profanity), is almost inevitably inferior in strength and beauty; woman is not form, but expression, and therefore suits painting, but not sculpture. The point of a woman is not her body, but (and here his eyes rested very tenderly upon the thin white profile of his wife) her soul. “Still,” I answered, “the ancients, who understood such matters, did manufacture some tolerable female statues: the Fates of the Parthenon, the Phidian Pallas, the Venus of Milo.” . . .

“Ah! yes,” exclaimed Waldemar, smiling, with that savage gleam of his eyes; “but those are not women, and the people who made them have left us the tales of

Dionea

Endymion, Adonis, Anchises: a goddess might sit for them." . . .

May 5, 1887.

Has it ever struck your Excellency in one of your La Rochefoucauld fits (in Lent say, after too many balls) that not merely maternal but conjugal unselfishness may be a very selfish thing? There! you toss your little head at my words; yet I wager I have heard you say that *other* women may think it right to humour their husbands, but as to you, the Prince must learn that a wife's duty is as much to chasten her husband's whims as to satisfy them. I really do feel indignant that such a snow-white saint should wish another woman to part with all instincts of modesty merely because that other woman would be a good model for her husband; really it is intolerable. "Leave the girl alone," Waldemar said, laughing. "What do I want with the unæsthetic sex, as Schopenhauer calls it?" But Gertrude has set her heart on his doing a female figure; it seems that folk have twitted him with never having produced one. She has long been on the look out for a model for him. It is odd to see this pale, demure, diaphanous creature, not the more earthly for approaching motherhood, scanning the girls of our village with the eyes of a slave-dealer.

"If you insist on speaking to Dionea," I said. "I shall insist on speaking to her at the same time, to urge her to refuse your proposal." But Waldemar's pale wife was indifferent to all my speeches about modesty being a poor girl's only dowry. "She will do for a Venus," she merely answered.

We went up to the cliffs together, after some sharp words, Waldemar's wife hanging on my arm as we slowly clambered up the stony path among the olives. We found Dionea at the door of her hut making faggots of myrtle-branches. She listened sullenly to Gertrude's offer and

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explanations; indifferently to my admonitions not to accept. The thought of stripping for the view of a man, which would send a shudder through our most brazen village girls, seemed not to startle her, immaculate and savage as she is accounted. She did not answer, but sat under the olives, looking vaguely across the sea. At that moment Waldemar came up to us; he had followed with the intention of putting an end to these wranglings.

"Gertrude," he said, "do leave her alone. I have found a model—a fisher-boy, whom I much prefer to any woman."

Dionea raised her head with that serpentine smile. "I will come," she said.

Waldemar stood silent; his eyes were fixed on her, where she stood under the olives, her white shift loose about her splendid throat, her shining feet bare in the grass. Vaguely, as if not knowing what he said, he asked her name. She answered that her name was Dionea; for the rest, she was an Innocentina, that is to say, a foundling; then she began to sing:—

"Flower of the myrtle!
My father is the starry sky;
The mother that made me is the sea."

June 22, 1887.

I confess I was an old fool to have grudged Waldemar his model. As I watch him gradually building up his statue, watch the goddess gradually emerging from the clay heap, I ask myself—and the case might trouble a more subtle moralist than me—whether a village girl, an obscure, useless life within the bounds of what we choose to call right and wrong, can be weighed against the possession by mankind of a great work of art, a Venus immortally beautiful? Still, I am glad that the two alternatives need not be weighed against each other. Nothing can equal the kindness of Gertrude, now that

Dionea

Dionea has consented to sit to her husband; the girl is ostensibly merely a servant like any other; and, lest any report of her real functions should get abroad and discredit her at San Massimo or Montemirto, she is to be taken to Rome, where no one will be the wiser, and where, by the way, your Excellency will have an opportunity of comparing Waldemar's goddess of love with our little orphan of the Convent of the Stigmata. What reassures me still more is the curious attitude of Waldemar towards the girl. I could never have believed that an artist could regard a woman so utterly as a mere inanimate thing, a form to copy, like a tree or flower. Truly he carries out his theory that sculpture knows only the body, and the body scarcely considered as human. The way in which he speaks to Dionea after hours of the most rapt contemplation of her is almost brutal in its coldness. And yet to hear him exclaim, "How beautiful she is! Good God, how beautiful!" No love of mere woman was ever so violent as this love of woman's mere shape.

June 27, 1887.

You asked me once, dearest Excellency, whether there survived among our people (you had evidently added a volume on folk-lore to that heap of half-cut, dog's-eared books that litter about among the Chineseries and mediæval brocades of your rooms) any trace of Pagan myths. I explained to you then that at our fairy mythology, classic gods, and demons and heroes, teemed with fairies, ogres, and princes. Last night I had a curious proof of this. Going to see the Waldemar, I found Dionea seated under the oleander at the top of the old Genoese fort, telling stories to the two little blonde children who were making the falling pink blossoms into necklaces at her feet; the pigeons, Dionea's white pigeons, which never leave her, strutting and pecking among the basil pots, and the white gulls flying round the rocks over-

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head. This is what I heard. . . . "And the three fairies said to the youngest son of the King, to the one who had been brought up as a shepherd, 'Take this apple, and give it to her among us who is most beautiful.' And the first fairy said, 'If thou give it to me thou shalt be Emperor of Rome, and have purple clothes, and have a gold crown and gold armour, and horses and courtiers;' and the second said, 'If thou give it to me thou shalt be Pope, and wear a mitre, and have the keys of heaven and hell;' and the third fairy said, 'Give the apple to me, for I will give thee the most beautiful lady to wife.' And the youngest son of the King sat in the green meadow and thought about it a little, and then said, 'What use is there in being Emperor or Pope? Give me the beautiful lady to wife, since I am young myself.' And he gave the apple to the third of the fairies." . . .

Dionea droned out the story in her half-Genoese dialect, her eyes looking far away across the blue sea, dotted with sails like white sea-gulls, that strange serpentine smile on her lips.

"Who told thee that fable?" I asked.

She took a handful of oleander-blossoms from the ground, and throwing them in the air, answered listlessly, as she watched the little shower of rosy petals descend on her black hair and pale breast—

"Who knows?"

July 6, 1887.

How strange is the power of art! Has Waldemar's statue shown me the real Dionea, or has Dionea really grown more strangely beautiful than before? Your Excellency will laugh; but when I meet her I cast down my eyes after the first glimpse of her loveliness; not with the shyness of a ridiculous old pursuer of the Eternal Feminine, but with a sort of religious awe—the feeling with which, as a child kneeling by my mother's side, I

Dionea

looked down on the church flags when the Mass bell told the elevation of the Host. . . . Do you remember the story of Zeuxis and the ladies of Crotona, five of the fairest not being too much for his Juno? Do you remember—you, who have read everything—all the bosh of our writers about the Ideal in Art? Why, here is a girl who disproves all this nonsense in a minute; she is far, far more beautiful than Waldemar's statue of her. He said so angrily, only yesterday, when his wife took me into his studio (he has made a studio of the long-deseccrated chapel of the old Genoese fort, itself, they say, occupying the site of the temple of Venus).

As he spoke that odd spark of ferocity dilated in his eyes, and seizing the largest of his modelling tools, he obliterated at one swoop the whole exquisite face. Poor Gertrude turned ashy white, and a convulsion passed over her face. . . .

July 15.

I wish I could make Gertrude understand, and yet I could never, never bring myself to say a word. As a matter of fact, what is there to be said? Surely she knows best that her husband will never love any woman but herself. Yet ill, nervous as she is, I quite understand that she must loathe this unceasing talk of Dionea, of the superiority of the model over the statue. Cursed statue! I wish it were finished, or else that it had never been begun.

July 20.

This morning Waldemar came to me. He seemed strangely agitated: I guessed he had something to tell me, and yet I could never ask. Was it cowardice on my part? He sat in my shuttered room, the sunshine making pools on the red bricks and tremulous stars on the ceiling, talking of many things at random, and mechanically turning over the manuscript, the heap of notes of my poor,

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never-finished book on the Exiled Gods. Then he rose, and walking nervously round my study, talking disconnectedly about his work, his eye suddenly fell upon a little altar, one of my few antiquities, a little block of marble with a carved garland and rams' heads, and a half-effaced inscription dedicating it to Venus, the mother of Love.

"It was found," I explained, "in the ruins of the temple, somewhere on the site of your studio: so, at least, the man said from whom I bought it."

Waldemar looked at it long. "So," he said, "this little cavity was to burn the incense in; or rather, I suppose, since it has two little gutters running into it, for collecting the blood of the victim? Well, well! they were wiser in that day, to wring the neck of a pigeon or burn a pinch of incense than to eat their own hearts out, as we do, all along of Dame Venus;" and he laughed, and left me with that odd ferocious lighting-up of his face. Presently there came a knock at my door. It was Waldemar. "Doctor," he said very quietly, "will you do me a favour? Lend me your little Venus altar—only for a few days, only till the day after tomorrow. I want to copy the design of it for the pedestal of my statue: it is appropriate." I sent the altar to him: the lad who carried it told me that Waldemar had set it up in the studio, and calling for a flask of wine, poured out two glasses. One he had given to my messenger for his pains; of the other he had drunk a mouthful, and thrown the rest over the altar, saying some unknown words. "It must be some German habit," said my servant. What odd fancies this man has!

July 25.

You ask me, dearest Excellency, to send you some sheets of my book: you want to know what I have discovered. Alas! dear Donna Evelina, I have discovered, I fear, that there is nothing to discover; that Apollo was never in Styria; that Chaucer, when he called the Queen of the

Dionea

Fairies Proserpine, meant nothing more than an eighteenth century poet when he called Dolly or Betty Cynthia or Amaryllis; that the lady who damned poor Tannhäuser was not Venus, but a mere little Suabian mountain sprite; in fact, that poetry is only the invention of poets, and that that rogue Heinrich Heine, is entirely responsible for the existence of *Dicux en Exil*. . . . My poor manuscript can only tell you what St. Augustine, Tertullian, and sundry morose old Bishops thought about the loves of Father Zeus and the miracles of the Lady Isis, none of which is much worth your attention. . . . Reality, my dear Lady Evelyn, is always prosaic at least when investigated into by bald old gentlemen like me.

And yet, it does not look so. The world, at times, seems to be playing at being poetic, mysterious, full of wonder and romance. I am writing, as usual, by my window, the moonlight brighter in its whiteness than my mean little yellow-shining lamp. From the mysterious greyness, the olive groves and lanes beneath my terrace, rises a confused quiver of frogs, and buzz and whirr of insects: something, in sound, like the vague trails of countless stars, the galaxies on galaxies blurred into mere blue shimmer by the moon, which rides slowly across the highest heaven. The olive twigs glisten in the rays: the flowers of the pomegranate and oleander are only veiled as with bluish mist in their scarlet and rose. the sea is another sea, of molten, rippled silver, or a magic causeway leading to the shining vague offing, the luminous pale sky-line, where the islands of Palmaria and Tino float like unsubstantial, shadowy dolphins. The roofs of Montemirto glimmer among the black, pointing cypresses: farther below, at the end of that half-moon of land, is San Massimo: the Genoese fort inhabited by our friends is profiled black against the sky. All is dark: our fisherfolk go to bed early; Gertrude and the little ones are asleep;

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they at least are, for I can imagine Gertrude lying awake, the moonbeams on her thin Madonna face, smiling as she thinks of the little ones around her, of the other tiny thing that will soon lie on her breast. . . . There is a light in the old desecrated chapel, the thing that was once the temple of Venus, they say, and is now Waldemar's workshop, its broken roof mended with reeds and thatch. Waldemar has stolen in, no doubt to see his statue again. But he will return, more peaceful for the peacefulness of the night, to his sleeping wife and children. God bless and watch over them! Good-night, dearest Excellency.

July 26.

I have your Excellency's telegram in answer to mine. Many thanks for sending the Prince. I await his coming with feverish longing; it is still something to look forward to. All does not seem over. And yet what can he do?

The children are safe: we fetched them out of their bed and brought them up here. They are still a little shaken by the fire, the bustle, and by finding themselves in a strange house; also, they want to know where their mother is; but they have found a tame cat, and I hear them chirping on the stairs.

It was only the roof of the studio, the reeds and thatch, that burned, and a few old pieces of timber. Waldemar must have set fire to it with great care; he had brought armfuls of faggots of dry myrtle and heather from the bakehouse close by, and thrown into the blaze quantities of pine-cones, and of some resin, I know not what, that smelt like incense. When we made our way, early this morning, through the smouldering studio, we were stifled with a hot church-like perfume: my brain swam, and I suddenly remembered going into St. Peter's on Easter Day as a child.

Dionea

It happened last night, while I was writing to you. Gertrude had gone to bed, leaving her husband in the studio. About eleven the maids heard him come out and call to Dionea to get up and come and sit to him. He had had this craze once before, of seeing her and his statue by an artificial light: you remember he had theories about the way in which the ancients lit up the statues in their temples. Gertrude, the servants say, was heard creeping downstairs a little later.

Do you see it? I have seen nothing else these hours, which have seemed weeks and months. He had placed Dionea on the big marble block behind the altar, a great curtain of dull red brocade—you know that Venetian brocade with the gold pomegranate pattern—behind her, like a Madonna of Van Eyck's. He showed her to me once before. Like this, the whiteness of her neck and breast, the whiteness of the drapery round her flanks, toned to the colour of old marble by the light of the resin burning in pans all round. . . . Before Dionea was the altar—the altar of Venus which he had borrowed from me. He must have collected all the roses about it, and thrown the incense upon the embers when Gertrude suddenly entered. And then, and then . . .

We found her lying across the altar, her pale hair among the ashes of the incense, her blood she had but little to give, poor white ghost!—trickling among the carved garlands and rams' heads, blackening the heaped-up roses. The body of Waldemar was found at the foot of the castle cliff. Had he hoped, by setting the place on fire, to bury himself among its ruins, or had he not rather wished to complete in this way the sacrifice, to make the whole temple an immense votive pyre? It looked like one, as we hurried down the hills to San Massimo: the whole hillside, dry grass, myrtle, and heather, all burning, the

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pale short flames waving against the blue moonlit sky, and the old fortress outlined black against the blaze.

August 30.

Of Dionea I can tell you nothing certain. We speak of her as little as we can. Some say they have seen her, on stormy nights, wandering among the cliffs: but a sailor-boy assures me, by all the holy things, that the day after the burning of the Castle Chapel—we never call it anything else—he met at dawn, off the island of Palmaria, beyond the Strait of Porto Venere, a Greek boat, with eyes painted on the prow, going full sail to sea, the men singing as she went. And against the mast, a robe of purple and gold about her, and a myrtle-wreath on her head, leaned Dionea, singing words in an unknown tongue, the white pigeons circling around her.

Ravenna and Her Ghosts

Publisher's Note

Ravenna and her Ghosts is not a story, although in this vignette is retold a mediæval legend of the supernatural. It has been included in this volume because it is not far removed from the stories which make up this book, and also because it is in her vivid evocations of mediæval Italian life that Vernon Lee's talent is shown at its height.

My oldest impression of Ravenna, before it became in my eyes the abode of living friends as well as of outlandish ghosts, is of a melancholy spring sunset at Classe.

Classe, which Dante and Boccaccio call in less Latin fashion Chiassi, is the place where of old the fleet (*classis*) of the Romans and Ostrogoths rode at anchor in the Adriatic. And Boccaccio says that it is (but I think he over-calculates) at three miles distance from Ravenna. It is represented in the mosaic of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, dating from the reign of Theodoric, by a fine city wall of gold *tesseræ* (facing the representation of Theodoric's town palace with the looped-up embroidered curtains) and a strip of ultramarine sea, with two rowing-boat and one white blown-out sail upon it. Ravenna, which is now an inland town, was at that time built in a lagoon; and we must picture Classe in much the same relation to it that Malamocco or the Port of Lido is to Venice, the open-sea-harbour, where big ships and flotillas were stationed, while smaller craft wound through the channels and sand-banks up to the city. But now the lagoon has dried up, the Adriatic has receded, and there remains of *Classis* not a stone, save, in the midst of stagnant canals, rice

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marsh and brown bogland, a gaunt and desolate church, with a ruinous mildewed house and a crevassed round tower by its side.

It seemed to me that first time, and has ever since seemed, no Christian church, but the temple of the great Roman goddess Fever. The gates stood open, as they do all day lest inner damp consume the building, and a beam from the low sun slanted across the oozy brown nave and struck a round spot of glittering green on the mosaic of the apse. There, in the half-dome, stood rows and rows of lambs, each with its little tree and lilies, shining out white from the brilliant green grass of Paradise, great streams of gold and blue circling around them, and widening overhead into lakes of peacock splendour. The slanting sunbeam which burnished that spot of green and gold and brown mosaic, fell also across the altar steps, brown and green in their wet mildew like the ceiling above. The floor of the church, sunk below the level of the road, was as a piece of boggy ground leaving the feet damp, and breathing a clammy horror on the air. Outside the sun was setting behind a bank of solid grey clouds, faintly reddening their rifts and sending a few rose-coloured streaks into the pure yellow evening sky. Against that sky stood out the long russet line, the delicate cupolaed silhouette of the sear pinewood recently blasted by frost. While, on the other side, the marsh stretched out beyond sight, confused in the distance with grey clouds, its lines of bare spectral poplars picked out upon its green and the greyness of the sky. All round the church lay brown grass, livid pools, green rice-fields covered with clear water reflecting the red sunset streaks; and overhead, driven by storm from the sea, the white gulls, ghosts you might think, of the white-sailed galleys of Theodorje, still haunting the harbour of Classis.

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Since then, as I hinted, Ravenna has become the home of dear friends, to which I periodically return, in autumn or winter or blazing summer, without taking thought for any of the ghosts. And the impressions of Ravenna are mainly those of life; the voices of children, the plans of farmers, the squabbles of local politics. I am waked in the morning by the noises of the market; and opening my shutters, look down upon green umbrellas and awnings spread over baskets of fruit and vegetables, and heaps of ironware and stalls of coloured stuffs and gaudy kerchiefs. The streets are by no means empty. A steam tramcar puffs slowly along the widest of them; and, in the narrower, you have perpetually to squeeze against a house to make room for a clattering pony-cart, a jingling carriage, or one of those splendid bullock-waggons, shaped like an old-fashioned cannon-cart with spokeless wheels and metal studdings. There are no mediæval churches in Ravenna, and very few mediæval houses. The older palaces, though practically fortified, have a vague look of Roman villas; and the whole town is painted a delicate rose and apricot colour, which, particularly if you have come from the sad-coloured cities of Tuscany, gives it a Venetian, and (if I may say so) chintz-petticoat flowered-kerchief cheerfulness. And the life of the people, when you come in contact with it, also leaves an impression of provincial, rustic bustle. The Romagnans are full of crude socialism. The change from rice to wheat-growing has produced agricultural discontent; and conspiracy has been in the blood of these people, ever since Dante answered the Romagnolo Guido that his country would never have peace in its heart. The ghosts of Byzantine emperors and exarchs, of Gothic kings and mediæval tyrants must be laid, one would think, by socialist meetings and election-eering squabbles; and perhaps by another movement, as modern and as revolutionary, which also centres in this

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big historical village, the reclaiming of marshland, which may bring about changes in mode of living and thinking such as Socialism can never effect; nay, for all one knows, changes in climate, in sea and wind and clouds. *Bonification*, reclaiming, that is the great word in Ravenna; and I had scarcely arrived last autumn, before I found myself whirled off, among dog-carts and *chars-à-bancs*, to view reclaimed land in the cloudless, pale blue, ice-cold weather. On we trotted, with a great consulting of maps and discussing of expenses and production, through the flat green fields and meadows marked with haystacks, and jolted along a deep sandy track, all that remains of the *Romœa*, the pilgrims' way from Venice to Rome, where marsh and pool begin to interrupt the well-kept pastures, and the line of pine woods to come nearer and nearer. Over the fields, the frequent canals, and hidden ponds, circled gulls and wild fowl; and at every farm there was a little crowd of pony-carts and of gaitered sportsmen returning from the marshes. A sense of reality, of the present, of useful, bread-giving, fever-curing activity came by sympathy, as I listened to the chatter of my friends, and saw field after field, farm after farm, pointed out where, but a while ago, only swamp grass and bushes grew, and cranes and wild duck nested. In ten, twenty, fifty years, they went on calculating, Ravenna will be able to diminish by so much the town-rates; the *Romagnas* will be able to support so many more thousands of inhabitants; and that merely by employing the rivers to deposit arable soil torn from the mountain valleys; the rivers—Po and his followers, as Dante called them—which have so long turned this country into marsh; the rivers which, in a thousand years, cut off Ravenna from her sea.

We turned towards home, greedy for tea, and mightily in conceit with progress. But before us, at a turn of the road, appeared Ravenna, its towers and cupolas against

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a bank of clouds, a piled-up heap of sunset fire; its canal, barred with flame, leading into its black vagueness, a spectre city. And there, to the left, among the bare trees, loomed the great round tomb of Theodoric. We jingled on, silent and overcome by the deathly December chill.

That is the odd thing about Ravenna. It is, more than any of the Tuscan towns, more than most of the Lombard ones, modern, and full of rough, dull, modern life; and the past which haunts it comes from so far off, from a world with which we have no contact. Those pillared basilicas, which look like modern village churches from the street, affect one with their almost Moorish arches, their enamelled splendour of ultramarine, russet, sea-green and gold mosaics, their lily fields and peacock's tails in mosque-like domes, as great stranded hulks, come floating across Eastern seas and drifted ashore among the marsh and rice-field. The grapes and ivy berries, the pouting pigeons, the palm-trees and pecking peacocks, all this early symbolism with its association of Bacchic, Eleusinian mysteries, seems, quite as much as the actual fragments of Grecian capitals, the discs and gratings of porphyry and alabaster, so much flotsam and jetsam cast up from the shipwreck of an older Antiquity than Rome's; remnants of early Hellas, of Ionia. perhaps of Tyre.

I used to feel this particularly in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, or, as it is usually called, *Classe dentro*, the long basilica built by Theodoric, outrivalled later by Justinian's octagon church of Saint Vitalis. There is something extremely Hellenic in feeling (however un-Grecian in form) in the pearly fairness of the delicate silvery white columns and capitals; in the gleam of white, on golden ground, and reticulated with jewels and embroideries, of the long band of mosaic virgins and martyrs running above them.

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The virgins, with their Byzantine names—Sancta Anastasia, Sancta Anatolia, Sancta Eulalia, Sancta Euphemia—have big kohled eyes and embroidered garments fantastically suggesting some Eastern hieratic dancing-girl; but they follow each other, in single file (each with her lily or rose-bush sprouting from the gauze, green mosaic), with erect, slightly balanced gait like the maidens of the Panathenaic procession, carrying, one would say, votive offerings to the altar, rather than crowns of martyrdom; all stately, sedate, as if drilled by some priestly ballet-master, all with the same wide eyes and set smile as of early Greek sculpture. There is no attempt to distinguish one from the other. There are no gaping wounds, tragic attitudes, wheels, swords, pincers or other attributes of martyrdom. And the male saints on the wall opposite are equally unlike mediæval Sebastians and Laurences, going, one behind the other, in shining, white togas, to present their crowns to Christ on His throne. Christ also, in this Byzantine art, is never the Saviour. He sits, an angel on each side, on His golden seat, clad in purple and sandalled with gold, serene, beard-less, wide-eyed like some distant descendant of the Olympic Jove with his mantle of purple and gold.

This church of Saint Apollinaris contains a chapel specially dedicated to the saint, which sums up that curious impression of Hellenic pre-Christian cheerfulness. It is encrusted with porphyry and *giallo antico*, framed with delicate carved ivy wreaths along the sides, and railed in with an exquisite piece of alabaster openwork of vines and grapes, as on an antique altar. And in a corner of this little temple, which seems to be waiting for some painter enamoured of Greece and marble, stands the episcopal seat of the patron saint of the church, the saint who took his name from Apollo; an alabaster seat, wide-curved and delicate, ~~in~~ whose back you expect to find, so striking is

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the resemblance, the relief of dancing satyrs of the chair of the Priest of Dionysus.

As I was sitting one morning, as was my wont, in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, which (like all Ravenna churches) is always empty, a woman came in, with a woollen shawl over her head, who, after hunting anxiously about, asked me where she would find the parish priest. "It is," she said, "for the Madonna's milk. My husband is a labourer out of work, he has been ill, and the worry of it all has made me unable to nurse my little baby. I want the priest, to ask him to get the Madonna to give me back my milk." I thought, as I listened to the poor creature, that there was but little hope of motherly sympathy from that Byzantine Madonna in purple and gold mosaic magnificence, seated ceremoniously on her throne like an antique Cybele.

Little by little one returns to one's first impression, and recognises that this thriving little provincial town, with its socialism and its *bonification* is after all a nest of ghosts, and little better than the churchyard of centuries.

Never, surely, did a town contain so many coffins, or at least thrust coffins more upon one's notice. The coffins are stone, immense oblong boxes, with massive sloping lids horned at each corner, or trough-like things with delicate sea-wave patternings, figures of toga'd saints and devices of palm-trees, peacocks, and doves, the carving made clearer by a picking out of bright green damask. They stand about in all the churches, not walled in, but quite free in the aisles, the chapels, and even close to the door. Most of them are doubtless of the fifth or sixth century, others perhaps barbarous or mediæval imitations; but they all equally belong to the ages in general, including our own, not curiosities or heirlooms, but serviceable furniture, into which generations have been put, and out of which generations have been turned to make room for later comers. It strikes one as curious at first to see, for in-

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stance, the date 1826 on a sarcophagus probably made under Theodoric or the Exarchs, but that merely means that a particular gentleman of Ravenna began that year his lease of entombment. They have passed from hand to hand (or, more properly speaking, from corpse to corpse) not merely by being occasionally discovered in digging foundations, but by inheritance, and frequently by sale. My friends possess a stone coffin, and the receipt from its previous owner. The transaction took place some fifty years ago; a name (they are cut very lightly) changed, a slab or coat-of-arms placed with the sarcophagus in a different church or chapel, a deed before the notary—that was all. What became of the previous tenant? Once at least he surprised posterity very much; perhaps it was in the case of that very purchase for which my friends still keep the bill. I know not; but the stone-mason of the house used to relate that, some forty years ago, he was called in to open a stone coffin; when, the immense horned lid having been rolled off, there was seen, lying in the sarcophagus, a man in complete armour, his sword by his side and vizor up, who, as they cried out in astonishment, instantly fell to dust. Was he an Ostrogothic knight, some Gunther or Volker turned Roman senator, or perhaps a companion of Guido da Polenta, a messmate of Dante, a playfellow of Francesca?

Coffins being thus plentiful, their occupants (like this unknown warrior) have played considerable part in the gossip of Ravenna. It is well known, for instance, that Galla Placidia, daughter of Theodosius, sister of Arcadius and Honorius, and wife to a Visigothic king, sat for centuries enthroned (after a few years of the strangest adventures) erect, inside the alabaster coffin, formerly plated with gold, in the wonderful little blue mosaic chapel which bears her name. You could see her through a hole, quite plainly, until, three centuries ago, some inquisitive

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boys thrust in a candle, and burned Theodosius's daughter to ashes. Dante also is buried under a little cupola at the corner of a certain street, and there was, for many years, a strange doubt about his bones. Had they been mislaid, stolen, mixed up with those of ordinary mortals? The whole thing was shrouded in mystery. That street corner where Dante lies, a remote corner under the wing of a church, resembled, until it was modernised and surrounded by gratings, and filled with garlands and inscriptions to Mazzini, nothing so much as the corner of Dis where Dante himself found Farinata and Cavalcante. It is crowded with stone coffins; and, passing there in the twilight, one might expect to see flames upheaving their lids, and the elbows and shoulders of imprisoned followers of Epicurus.

Only once, so far as I know, have the inhabitants of Ravenna, Byzantine, mediæval, or modern, wasted a coffin; but one is very glad of that once. I am speaking of a Roman sarcophagus, on which you can still trace the outlines of garlands, which stands turned into a cattle trough, behind the solitary farm in the depth of the forest of St. Vitalis. Round it the grass is covered in summer by the creeping tendrils of the white clematis; and, in winter, the great thorn bushes and barberries and oaks blaze out crimson and scarlet and golden. The big, long eared, grey cows pass to and fro to be milked; and the shaggy ponies who haunt the pine wood come there to drink. It is better than housing no matter how many generations, jurisconsults, knights, monks, tyrants and persons of quality, among the damp and the stale incense of a church!

Enough of coffins! There are live things at Ravenna and near Ravenna; amongst others, though few people realise its presence, there is the sea.

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It was on the day of the fish auction that I first went there. In the tiny port by the pier (for Ravenna has now no harbour) they were making an incredible din over the emptyings of the nets; pretty, mottled, metallic fish, and slimy octopuses and sepias and flounders, looking like pieces of sea-mud. The fishing-boats, mostly from the Venetian lagoon, were moored along the pier, wide-bowed things, with eyes in the prow like the ships of Ulysses; and bigger craft, with little castles and weathervanes and saints' images and penons on the masts like the galleys of St. Ursula as painted by Carpaccio; but all with the splendid orange sail, patched with suns, lions, and coloured stripes, of the Northern Adriatic. The fishermen from Chioggia, their heads covered with the high scarlet cap of the fifteenth century, were yelling at the fishmongers from town; and all round lounged artillerymen in their white undress and yellow straps, who are encamped for practice on the sands, and whose carts and guns we had met rattling along the sandy road through the marsh.

On the pier we were met by an old man, very shabby and unshaven, who had been the priest for many years, with a salary of twelve pounds a year, of St. Maria in Porto Fuori, a little Gothic church in the marsh, where he had discovered and rubbed slowly into existence (it took him two months and heaven knows how many penny-worths of bread!) some valuable Giottesque frescoes. He was now chaplain of the harbour, and had turned his mind to maritime inventions, designing lighthouses, and shooting dolphins to make oil of their blubber. A kind old man, but with the odd brightness of a creature who has lived for years amid solitude and fever; a fit companion for the haggard saints whom he brought, one by one, in robes of glory and golden halos, to life again in his forlorn little church.

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While we were looking out at the sea, where a little flotilla of yellow and cinnamon sails sat on the blue of the view-line like parrots on a rail, the sun had begun to set, a crimson ball, over the fringe of pine woods. We turned to go. Over the town, the place whence presently will emerge the slanting towers of Ravenna, the sky had become a brilliant, melancholy slate-blue; and apparently out of its depths, in the early twilight, flowed the wide canal between its dim banks fringed with tamarisk. No tree, no rock, or house was reflected in the jade-coloured water, only the uniform shadow of the bank made a dark, narrow band alongside its glassiness. It flows on towards the invisible sea, whose yellow sails overtop the grey marshland. In thick smooth strands of curdled water it flows lilac, pale pink, opalescent according to the sky above, reflecting nothing besides, save at long intervals the spectral spars and spider-like tissue of some triangular fishing-net; a wan and delicate Lethe, issuing, you would say, out of a far-gone past into the sands and the almost tideless sea.

Other places become solemn, sad, or merely beautiful at sunset. But Ravenna, it seems to me, grows actually ghostly; the Past takes it back at that moment, and the ghosts return to the surface.

For it is, after all, a nest of ghosts. They haunt about all those silent, damp churches; invisible, or almost tantalising one with a sudden gleam which may, after all, be only that of the mosaics, an uncertain outline which, when you near it, is after all only a pale grey column. But one feels their breathing all round. They are legion, but I do not know who they are. I only know that they are white, luminous, with gold embroidery to their robes, and wide, painted eyes, and that they are silent. The good citizens of Ravenna, in the comfortable eighteenth century, filled the churches with wooden pews, convenient,

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genteel in line and colour, with their names and coats-of-arms in full on the backs. But the ghosts took no notice of this measure; and there they are, even among these pews themselves.

Bishops and Exarchs, and jewelled Empresses, and half Oriental Autocrats, saints and bedizened court-ladies, and barbarian guards and wicked chamberlains; I know not what they are. Only one of the ghosts takes a shape I can distinguish, and a name I am certain of. It is not Justinian or Theodora, who stare goggle-eyed from their mosaic in San Vitale mere wretched historic realities; *they* cannot haunt. The spectre I speak of is Theodoric. His tomb is still standing, outside the town in an orchard; a great round tower, with a circular roof made (heaven knows how) of one huge slab of Istrian stone, horned at the sides like the sarcophagi, or vaguely like a Viking's cap. The ashes of the great king have long been dispersed, for he was an Arian heretic. But the tomb remains, intact, a thing which neither time nor earthquake can dismantle.

In the town they show a piece of masonry, the remains of a doorway, and a delicate, pillared window, built on to a modern house, which is identified (but wrongly I am told) as Theodoric's palace, by its resemblance to the golden palace with the looped-up curtains on the mosaic of the neighbouring church. Into the wall of this building is built a great Roman porphyry bath, with rings carved on it, to which time has adjusted a lid of brilliant green lichen. There is no more. But Theodoric still haunts Ravenna. I have always, ever since I have known the town, been anxious to know more about Theodoric, but the accounts are jejune, prosaic, not at all answering to what that great king, who took his place with Attila and Sigurd in the great Northern epic, must have been. Historians represent him generally as a sort of superior barbarian, trying to assimilate and save the civilisation

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he was bound to destroy; an Ostrogothic king trying to be a Roman empéror; a military organiser and bureaucrat, exchanging his birthright of Valhalla for heaven knows what aulic red-tape miseries. But that is unsatisfactory. The real man, the Berserker trying to tame himself into the Cæsar of a fallen, shrunken Rome, seems to come out in the legend of his remorse and visions, pursued by the ghosts of Boetius and Symmachus, the wise men he had slain in his madness.

He haunts Ravenna, striding along the aisles of her basilicas, riding under the high moon along the dykes of her marshes, surrounded by white-stoled Romans, and Roman ensigns with eagles and crosses; but clad, as the Gothic brass-worker of Innsbruck has shown him, in no Roman lappets and breastplate, but in full mail, with beak and steel shoes and steel gorget, his big sword drawn, his vizor down, mysterious, the Dietrich of the Nibelungenlied, Theodoric King of the Goths.

These are the ghosts that haunt Ravenna, the true ghosts haunting only for such as can know their presence. But Ravenna, almost alone among Italian cities, possesses moreover a complete ghost-story of the most perfect type and highest antiquity, which has gone round the world and become known to all people. Boccaccio wrote it in prose; Dryden re-wrote it in verse; Botticelli illustrated it; and Byron summed up its quality in one of his most sympathetic passages. After this, to re-tell it were useless, had I not chanced to obtain, in a manner I am not at liberty to divulge, another version, arisen in Ravenna itself, and written, most evidently, in fullest knowledge of the case. Its language is the barbarous Romagnol dialect of the early fifteenth century, and it lacks all the Tuscan graces of the Decameron. But it possesses a certain air of truthfulness, suggesting that it was written by some one who had heard the facts from those who

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believed in them, and who believed in them himself; and I am therefore decided to give it, turned into English.

THE LEGEND

About that time (when Messer Guido da Pollenta was lord of Ravenna) men spoke not a little of what happened to Messer Nastasio de Honestia, son of Messer Brunoro, in the forest of Classis. Now the forest of Classis is exceeding vast, extending along the sea-shore between Ravenna and Cervia for the space of some fifteen miles, and has its beginning near the church of Saint Apollinaris, which is in the marsh; and you reach it directly from the gate of the same name, but also, crossing the River Ronco where it is easier to ford, by the gate called Sisa, beyond the houses of the Rasponis. And this forest aforesaid is made of many kinds of noble and useful trees, to wit, oaks, both free standing and in bushes, ilxes, elms, poplars, bays, and many plants of smaller growth but great dignity and pleasantness, as hawthorns, barberries, blackthorn, blackberry, brier-rose, and the thorn called marrucca, which bears pods resembling small hats or cymbals, and is excellent for hedging. But principally does this noble forest consist of pine-trees, exceeding lofty and perpetually green; whence indeed the arms of this ancient city, formerly the seat of the Emperors of Rome, are none other than a green pine-tree.

And the forest aforesaid is well stocked with animals, both such as run and creep, and many birds. The animals are foxes, badgers, hares, rabbits, ferrets, squirrels, and wild boars, the which issue forth and eat the young crops and grub the fields with incredible damage to all concerned. Of the birds it would be too long to speak, both of those which are snared, shot with cross-bows, or hunted with the falcon; and they feed off fish in the ponds and streams of the forest, and grasses and berries, and the

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pods of the white vine (clematis) which covers the grass on all sides. And the manner of Messer Nastasio being in the forest was thus, he being at the time a youth of twenty years or thereabouts, of illustrious birth, and comely person and learning and prowess, and modest and discreet bearing. For it so happened that, being enamoured of the daughter of Messer Hostasio de Traversariis, the damsel, who was lovely, but exceeding coy and shrewish, would not consent to marry him, despite the desire of her parents, who in everything, as happens with only daughters of old men (for Messer Hostasio was well stricken in years), sought only to please her. Whereupon Messer Nastasio, fearing lest the damsel might despise his fortunes, wasted his substance in presents and feasting, and joustings, but all to no avail.

When it happened that having spent nearly all he possessed and ashamed to show his poverty and his unlucky love before the eyes of his townsmen, he betook him to the forest of Classis, it being autumn, on the pretext of snaring birds, but intending to take privily the road to Rimini and thence to Rome, and there seek his fortune. And Nastasio took with him fowling-nets, and bird-lime, and tame owls, and two horses (one of which was ridden by his servant), and food for some days; and they alighted in the midst of the forest, and slept in one of the fowling-huts of cut branches set up by the citizens of Ravenna for their pleasure.

And it happened that on the afternoon of the second day (and it chanced to be Friday) of his stay in the forest, Messer Nastasio, being exceedingly sad in his heart, went forth towards the sea to muse upon the unkindness of his beloved and the hardness of his fortune. Now you should know that near the sea, where you can clearly hear its roar even on windless days there is in that forest a clear place, made as by the hand of man, set round with

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tall pines even like a garden, but in the shape of a horse-course, free from bushes and pools, and covered with the finest greensward. Here, as Nastasio sat him on the trunk of a pine—the hour was sunset, the weather being uncommon clear—he heard a rushing sound in the distance, as of the sea; and there blew a death-cold wind; and then came sounds of crashing branches, and neighing of horses, and yelping of hounds, and halloes and horns. And Nastasio wondered greatly, for that was not the hour for hunting; and he hid behind a great pine trunk, fearing to be recognised. And the sounds came nearer, even of horns and hounds, and the shouts of huntsmen; and the bushes rustled and crashed, and the hunt rushed into the clearing, horsemen and foot, with many hounds. And behold, what they pursued was not a wild boar, but something white that ran erect, and it seemed to Messer Nastasio, as if it greatly resembled a naked woman; and it screamed piteously.

Now when the hunt had swept past, Messer Nastasio rubbed his eyes and wondered greatly. But even as he wondered, and stood in the middle of the clearing, behold, part of the hunt swept back, and the thing which they pursued ran in a circle on the greensward, shrieking piteously. And behold, it was a young damsel, naked, her hair loose and full of brambles, with only a tattered cloth around her middle. And as she came near to where Messer Nastasio was standing (but no one of the hunt seemed to heed him) the hounds were upon her, barking furiously, and a hunter on a black horse, black even as night. And a cold wind blew and caused Nastasio's hair to stand on end, and he tried to cry out, and to rush forward, but his voice died in his throat and his limbs were heavy, and covered with sweat, and refused to move.

Then the hounds fastening on the damsel threw her down, and he on the black horse turned swiftly, and trans-

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fixed her, shrieking dismally, with a boar-spear. And those of the hunt galloped up, and wound their horns; and he on the black horse, which was a stately youth habited in a coat of black and gold, and black boots and black feathers on his hat, threw his reins to a groom, and alighted and approached the damsel where she lay, while the huntsmen were holding back the hound and winding their horns. Then he drew a knife, such as are used by huntsmen, and driving its blade into the damsel's side, cut out her heart, and threw it, all smoking, into the midst of the hounds. And a cold wind rustled through the bushes, and all had disappeared, horses, and huntsmen, and hounds. And the grass was untrodden as if no man's foot or horse's hoof had passed there for months.

And Messer Nastasio shuddered, and his limbs loosened, and he knew that the hunter on the black horse was Messer Guido Degli Anastagi, and the damsel Monna Filomena, daughter of the Lord of Gambellara. Messer Guido had loved the damsel greatly, and been flouted by her, and leaving his home in despair, had been killed on the way by robbers, and Madonna Filomena had died shortly after. The tale was still fresh in men's memory, for it had happened in the city of Ravenna barely five years before. And those whom Nastasio had seen, both the hunter and the lady, and the huntsmen and horses and hounds, were the spirits of the dead.

When he had recovered his courage, Messer Nastasio sighed and said unto himself: "How like is my fate to that of Messer Guido! Yet would I never, even when a spectre, without weight or substance, made of wind and delusion, and arisen from hell, act with such cruelty towards her I love." And then he thought: "Would that the daughter of Messer Pavolo de Traversariis might hear of this! For surely it would cause her to relent!" But he knew that his words would be in vain, and that none of

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the citizens of Ravenna, and least of all the damsel of the Traversari, would believe them, but rather esteem him a madman.

Now it came about that when Friday came round once more, Nastasio, by some chance, was again walking in the forest-clearing by the great pines, and he had forgotten; when the sea began to roar, and a cold wind blew; and there came through the forest the sound of horses and hounds, causing Messer Nastasio's hair to stand up and his limbs to grow weak as water. And he on the black horse again pursued the naked damsel, and struck her with his boar-spear, and cut out her heart and threw it to the hounds: the which hunter and damsel were the ghosts of Messer Guido, and of Madonna Filomena, daughter of the Lord of Gambellara, arisen out of Hell. And in this fashion did it happen for three Fridays following, the sea beginning to moan, the cold wind to blow and the spirits to hunt the deceased damsel at twilight in the clearing among the pine-trees.

Now when Messer Nastasio noticed this, he thanked Cupid, which is the Lord of all Lovers, and devised in his mind a cunning plan. And he mounted his horse and returned to Ravenna, and gave out to his friends that he had found a treasure in Rome; and that he was minded to forget the damsel of the Traversari and seek another wife. But in reality he went to certain money-lenders, and gave himself into bondage, even to be sold as a slave to the Dalmatian pirates if he could not repay his loan. And he published that he desired to take to him a wife, and for that reason would feast all his friends and the chief citizens of Ravenna, and regale them with a pageant in the pine forest, where certain foreign slaves of his should show wonderful feats for their delight. And he sent forth invitations, and among them to Messer Pavolo de Traversariis and his wife and daughter. And he bid them

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for a Friday, which was also the eve of the Feast of the Dead.

Meanwhile he took to the pine forest carpenters and masons, and such as paint and gild cunningly, and waggons of timber, and cut stone for foundations, and furniture of all kinds; and the waggons were drawn by four and twenty yoke of oxen, grey oxen of the Romagnol breed. And he caused the artisans to work day and night, making great fires of dry myrtle and pine branches, which lit up the forest all around. And he caused them to make foundations, and build a pavilion of timber in the clearing which is the shape of a horse-course, surrounded by pines. The pavilion was oblong, raised by ten steps above the grass, open all round and reposing on arches and pillars; and there was a projecting *abacus* under the arches over the capitals, after the Roman fashion; and the pillars were painted red, and the capitals red also picked out with gold and blue, and a shield with the arms of the Honestis on each. The roof was raftered, each rafter painted with white lilies on a red ground, and heads of youths and damsels, and the roof outside was made of wooden tiles, shaped like shells and gilded. And on the top of the roof was a weather-vane; and the vane was a figure of Cupid, god of love, cunningly carved of wood and painted like life, as he flies, poised in air, and shoots his darts on mortals. He was winged and blindfolded, to show that love is inconstant and no respecter of persons; and when the wind blew, he turned about, and the end of his scarf, which was beaten metal, swung in the wind. Now when the pavilion was ready, within six days of its beginning, carpets were spread on the floor, and seats placed, and garlands of bay and myrtle slung from pillar to pillar between the arches. And tables were set, and sideboards covered with gold and silver dishes and trenchers; and a raised place, covered with arras, was made for the

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players of fifes and drums and lutes; and tents were set behind for the servants, and fires prepared for cooking meat. Whole oxen and sheep were brought from Ravenna in wains, and casks of wine, and fruit and white bread, and many cooks, and serving-men, and musicians, all habited gallantly in the colours of the Honestis, which are vermillion and white, parti-coloured, with black stripes; and they wore doublets laced with gold, and on their breast the arms of the house of Honestis, which are a dove holding a leaf.

Now on Friday the eve of the Feast of the Dead, all was ready, and the chief citizens of Ravenna set out for the forest of Classis, with their wives and children and servants, some on horseback, and others in wains drawn by oxen, for the tracks in that forest are deep. And when they arrived, Messer Nastasio welcomed them and thanked them all, and conducted them to their places in the pavilion. Then all wondered greatly at its beauty and magnificence, and chiefly Messer Pavolo de Traversariis; and he sighed, and thought within himself, "Would that my daughter were less shrewish, that I might have so noble a son-in-law to prop up my old age!" They were seated at the tables, each according to their dignity, and they ate and drank and praised the excellence of the cheer; and flowers were scattered on the tables, and young maidens sang songs in praise of love, most sweetly. Now when they had eaten their fill, and the tables been removed, and the sun was setting between the pine-trees, Messer Nastasio caused them all to be seated facing the clearing, and a herald came forward, in the livery of the Honestis, sounding his trumpet and declaring in a loud voice that they should now witness a pageant, the which was called the Mystery of Love and Death. Then the musicians struck up, and began a concert of fifes and lutes, exceeding sweet and mournful. And at that moment

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the sea began to moan, and a cold wind to blow: a sound of horsemen and hounds and horns and crashing branches came through the wood; and the damsel, the daughter of the Lord of Gambellara, rushed naked, her hair streaming and her veil torn, across the grass, pursued by the hounds, and by the ghost of Messer Guido on the black horse, the nostrils of which were filled with fire. Now when the ghost of Messer Guido struck that damsel with the boarspear, and cut out her heart, and threw it, while the others wound their horns, to the hounds, and all vanished, Messer Nastasio de Honestis, seizing the herald's trumpet, blew in it, and cried in a loud voice, "The Pageant of Death and Love! The Pageant of Death and Love! Such is the fate of cruel damsels!" and the gilt Cupid on the roof swung round creaking dreadfully, and the daughter of Messer Pavolo uttered a great shriek and fell on the ground in a swoon.

Here the Romagnol manuscript comes to a sudden end, the outer sheet being torn through the middle. But we know from the Decameron that the damsel of the Traversari was so impressed by the spectre-hunt she had witnessed that she forthwith relented towards Nastagio degli Onesti, and married him, and that they lived happily ever after. But whether or not that part of the pine forest of Classis still witnesses this ghostly hunt, we have no means of knowing.

On the whole, I incline to think that, when the great frost blasted the pines (if not earlier) the ghosts shifted quarters from the forest of Classis to the church of the same name, on that forest's brink. Certainly there seems nothing to prevent them. Standing in the midst of those uninhabited rice-fields and marshes, the church of Classis is yet always open, from morning till night; the great portals gaping, no curtain interposed. Open and empty; mass not even on Sundays; empty of human beings. open

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to the things of without. The sunbeams enter through the open side windows, cutting a slice away from that pale, greenish twilight; making a wedge of light on the dark, damp bricks; bringing into brief prominence some of the great sarcophagi, their peacocks and palm-trees picked out in vivid green lichen. Snakes also enter, the Sacristan tells me, and I believe it, for within the same minute, I saw a dead and a living one among the arum leaves at the gate. Is that little altar, a pagan-looking marble table, isolated in the midst of the church, the place where they meet, pagan creatures claiming those Grecian marbles? Or do they hunt one another round the aisles and into the crypt, slithering and hissing, the souls of Guido degli Anastagi, perhaps, and of his cruel lady love?

Such are Ravenna and Classis, and the Ghosts that haunt them.

Oke of Okehurst

That sketch up there with the boy's cap? Yes; that's the same woman. I wonder whether you could guess who she was. A singular being, is she not? The most marvellous creature, quite, that I have ever met: a wonderful elegance, exotic, far-fetched, poignant; an artificial perverse sort of grace and research in every outline and movement and arrangement of head and neck, and hands and fingers. Here are a lot of pencil-sketches I made while I was preparing to paint her portrait. Yes; there's nothing but her in the whole sketch-book. Mere scratches, but they may give some idea of her marvellous, fantastic kind of grace. Here she is leaning over the staircase, and here sitting in the swing. Here she is walking quickly out of the room. That's her head. You see she isn't really handsome; her forehead is too big, and her nose too short. This gives no idea of her. It was altogether a question of movement. Look at the strange cheeks, hollow and rather flat: well, when she smiled she had the most marvellous dimples here. There was something exquisite and uncanny about it. Yes; I began the picture, but it was never finished. I did the husband first. I wonder who has his likeness now? Help me to move these pictures away from the wall. Thanks. This is her portrait; a huge wreck. I don't suppose you can make much of it; it is merely blocked in, and seems quite mad. You see my idea was to make her leaning against a wall—there was one hung with yellow that seemed almost brown—so as to bring out the silhouette.

It was very singular I should have chosen that particular wall. It does look rather insane in this condition, but I like it; it has something of her. I would frame it and

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hang it up, only people would ask questions. Yes; you have guessed quite right—it is Mrs. Oke of Okehurst. I forgot you had relations in that part of the country; besides, I suppose the newspapers were full of it at the time. You didn't know that it all took place under my eyes? I can scarcely believe now that it did: it all seems so distant, vivid but unreal, like a thing of my own invention. It really was much stranger than any one guessed. People could no more understand it than they could understand her. I doubt whether any one ever understood Alice Oke besides myself. You mustn't think me unfeeling. She was a marvellous, weird, exquisite creature, but one couldn't feel sorry for her. I felt much sorrier for the wretched creature of a husband. It seemed such an appropriate end for her; I fancy she would have liked it could she have known. Ah! I shall never have another chance of painting such a portrait as I wanted. She seemed sent me from heaven or the other place. You have never heard the story in detail? Well, I don't usually mention it, because people are so brutally stupid or sentimental; but I'll tell it you. Let me see. It's too dark to paint any more to-day, so I can tell it you now. Wait; I must turn her face to the wall. Ah, she was a marvellous creature.

II

You remember, three years ago, my telling you I had let myself in for painting a couple of Kentish squireen? I really could not understand what had possessed me to say yes to that man. A friend of mine had brought him one day to my studio—Mr. Oke of Okehurst, that was the name on his card. He was a very tall, very well-made, very good-looking young man, with a beautiful fair complexion, beautiful fair moustache, and beautifully fitting clothes; absolutely like a hundred other young men you can see

Oke of Okehurst

any day in the Park, and absolutely uninteresting from the crown of his head to the tip of his boots. Mr. Oke, who had been a lieutenant in the Blues before his marriage, was evidently extremely uncomfortable on finding himself in a studio. He felt misgivings about a man who could wear a velvet coat in town, but at the same time he was nervously anxious not to treat me in the very least like a tradesman. He walked round my place, looked at everything with the most scrupulous attention, stammered out a few complimentary phrases, and then, looking at his friend for assistance, tried to come to the point, but failed. The point, which the friend kindly explained, was that Mr. Oke was desirous to know whether my engagements would allow of my painting him and his wife, and what my terms would be. The poor man blushed perfectly crimson during this explanation, as if he had come with the most improper proposal; and I noticed—the only interesting thing about him—a very odd nervous frown between his eyebrows, a perfect double gash,—a thing which usually means something abnormal: a mad-doctor of my acquaintance calls it the maniac-frown. When I had answered, he suddenly burst out into rather confused explanations: his wife—Mrs. Oke—had seen some of my—pictures—paintings—portraits—at the—the—what d'you call it?—Academy. She had—in short, they had made a very great impression upon her. Mrs. Oke had a great taste for art; she was, in short, extremely desirous of having her portrait painted by me, *etcetera*.

“My wife,” he suddenly added “is a remarkable woman. I don't know whether you will think her handsome,—she isn't exactly, you know. But she's awfully strange,” and Mr. Oke of Okehurst gave a little sigh and frowned that curious frown, as if so long a speech and so decided an expression of opinion had cost him a great deal.

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It was a rather unfortunate moment in my career. A very influential sitter of mine—you remember the fat lady with the crimson curtain behind her?—had come to the conclusion or been persuaded that I had painted her old and vulgar, which, in fact, she was. Her whole clique had turned against me, the newspapers had taken up the matter, and for the moment I was considered as a painter to whose brushes no woman would trust her reputation. Things were going badly. So I snapped but too gladly at Mr. Oke's offer, and settled to go down to Okehurst at the end of a fortnight. But the door had scarcely closed upon my future sitter when I began to regret my rashness; and my disgust at the thought of wasting a whole summer upon the portrait of a totally uninteresting Kentish squire, and his doubtless equally uninteresting wife, grew greater and greater as the time for execution approached. I remember so well the frightful temper in which I got into the train for Kent, and the even more frightful temper in which I got out of it at the little station nearest to Okehurst. It was pouring floods. I felt a comfortable fury at the thought that my canvases would get nicely wetted before Mr. Oke's coachman had packed them on the top of the waggonette. It was just what served me right for coming to this confounded place to paint these confounded people. We drove off in the steady downpour. The roads were a mass of yellow mud; the endless flat grazing-grounds under the oak-trees, after having been burnt to cinders in a long drought, were turned into a hideous brown sop; the country seemed intolerably monotonous.

My spirits sank lower and lower. I began to meditate upon the modern Gothic country-house, with the usual amount of Morris furniture, Liberty rugs, and Mudie novels, to which I was doubtless being taken. My fancy pictured very vividly the five or six little Okes—that man

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certainly must have at least five children—the aunts, and sisters-in-law, and cousins; the eternal routine of afternoon tea and lawn-tennis; above all, it pictured Mrs. Oke, the bouncing, well-informed, model housekeeper, electioneering, charity-organising young-lady, whom such an individual as Mr. Oke would regard in the light of a remarkable woman. And my spirits sank within me, and I cursed my avarice in accepting the commission, my spiritlessness in not throwing it over while yet there was time. We had meanwhile driven into a large park, or rather a long succession of grazing-grounds, dotted about with large oaks, under which the sheep were huddled together for shelter from the rain. In the distance, blurred by the sheets of rain, was a line of low hills, with a jagged fringe of bluish firs and a solitary windmill. It must be a good mile and a half since we had passed a house, and there was none to be seen in the distance—nothing but the undulation of sere grass, sopped brown beneath the huge blackish oak-trees, and whence arose, from all sides, a vague disconsolate bleating. At last the road made a sudden bend, and disclosed what was evidently the home of my sitter. It was not what I had expected. In a dip in the ground a large red-brick house, with the rounded gables and high chimney-stacks of the time of James I.,—a forlorn, vast place, set in the midst of pasture land, with no trace of garden before it, and only a few large trees indicating the possibility of one to the back; no lawn either, but on the other side of the sandy dip, which suggested a filled-up moat, a huge oak short, hollow, with wreathing, blasted, black branches, upon which only a handful of leaves shook in the rain. It was not at all what I had pictured to myself the home of Mr. Oke of Okehurst.

My host received me in the hall, a large place, panelled and carved, hung round with portraits up to its curious

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ceiling—vaulted and ribbed like the inside of a ship's hull. He looked even more blond and pink and white, more absolutely mediocre in his tweed suit; and also, I thought, even more good-natured and duller. He took me into his study, a room hung round with whips and fishing-tackle in place of books, while my things were being carried upstairs. It was very damp, and a fire was smouldering. He gave the embers a nervous kick with his foot, and said, as he offered me a cigar—

“You must excuse my not introducing you at once to Mrs. Oke. My wife—in short, I believe my wife is asleep.”

“Is Mrs. Oke unwell?” I asked, a sudden hope flashing across me that I might be off the whole matter.

“Oh no! Alice is quite well; at least, quite as well as she usually is. My wife,” he added, after a minute, and in a very decided tone, “does not enjoy very good health—a nervous constitution. Oh no! not at all ill, nothing at all serious you know. Only nervous, the doctors say; mustn't be worried or excited, the doctors say; requires lots of repose,—that sort of thing.”

There was a dead pause. This man depressed me, I knew not why. He had a listless, puzzled look, very much out of keeping with his evident admirable health and strength.

“I suppose you are a great sportsman?” I asked from sheer despair, nodding in the direction of the whips and guns and fishing-rods.

“Oh no! not now. I was once. I have given up all that,” he answered, standing with his back to the fire, and staring at the polar bear beneath his feet. “I—I have no time for all that now,” he added, as if an explanation were due. “A married man—you know. Would you like to come up to your rooms?” he suddenly interrupted himself. “I have had one arranged for you to paint in. My

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wife said you would prefer a north light. If that one doesn't suit, you can have your choice of any other."

I followed him out of the study, through the vast entrance-hall. In less than a minute I was no longer thinking of Mr. and Mrs. Oke and the boredom of doing their likeness; I was simply overcome by the beauty of this house, which I had pictured modern and philistine. It was, without exception, the most perfect example of an old English manor-house that I had ever seen; the most magnificent intrinsically, and the most admirably preserved. Out of the huge hall, with its immense fireplace of delicately carved and inlaid grey and black stone, and its rows of family portraits, reaching from the wainscoting to the oaken ceiling, vaulted and ribbed like a ship's hull, opened the wide, flat-stepped staircase, the parapet surmounted at intervals by heraldic monsters, the wall covered with oak carvings of coats-of-arms, leafage, and little mythological scenes, painted a faded red and blue, and picked out with tarnished gold, which harmonised with the tarnished blue and gold of the stamped leather that reached to the oak cornice, again delicately tinted and gilded. The beautifully damascened suits of court armour looked, without being at all rusty, as if no modern hand had ever touched them; the very rugs under foot were of sixteenth-century Persian make; the only things of to-day were the big bunches of flowers and ferns, arranged in majolica dishes upon the landings. Everything was perfectly silent; only from below came the chimes, silvery like an Italian palace fountain, of an old-fashioned clock.

It seemed to me that I was being led through the palace of the Sleeping Beauty.

"What a magnificent house!" I exclaimed as I followed my host through a long corridor, also hung with leather, wainscoted with carvings, and furnished with big

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wedding coffers, and chairs that looked as if they came out of some Vandyck portrait. In my mind was the strong impression that all this was natural, spontaneous—that it had about it nothing of the picturesqueness which swell studios have taught to rich and æsthetic houses. Mr. Oke misunderstood me.

“It is a nice old place,” he said, “but it’s too large for us. You see, my wife’s health does not allow of our having many guests; and there are no children.”

I thought I noticed a vague complaint in his voice; and he evidently was afraid there might have seemed something of the kind, for he added immediately—

“I don’t care for children one jackstraw, you know, myself; can’t understand how any one can, for my part.”

If ever a man went out of his way to tell a lie, I said to myself, Mr. Oke of Okehurst was doing so at the present moment.

When he had left me in one of the two enormous rooms that were allotted to me, I threw myself into an arm-chair and tried to focus the extraordinary imaginative impression which this house had given me.

I am very susceptible to such impressions; and besides the sort of spasm of imaginative interest sometimes given to me by certain rare and eccentric personalities, I know nothing more subduing than the charm, quieter and less analytic, of any sort of complete and out-of-the-common-run sort of house. To sit in a room like the one I was sitting in, with the figures of the tapestry glimmering grey and lilac and purple in the twilight, the great bed, columned and curtained, looming in the middle, and the embers reddening beneath the overhanging mantelpiece of inlaid Italian stonework, a vague scent of rose-leaves and spices, put into the china bowls by the hands of ladies long since dead, while the clock downstairs sent up, every now and then, its faint silvery tune of forgotten days,

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filled the room;—to do this is a special kind of voluptuousness, peculiar and complex and indescribable, like the half-drunkenness of opium or haschisch, and which, to be conveyed to others in any sense as I feel it, would require a genius, subtle and heady, like that of Baudelaire.

After I had dressed for dinner I resumed my place in the arm-chair, and resumed also my reverie, letting all these impressions of the past—which seemed faded like the figures in the arras, but still warm like the embers in the fireplace, still sweet and subtle like the perfume of the dead rose-leaves and broken spices in the china bowls—permeate me and go to my head. Of Oke and Oke's wife I did not think; I seemed quite alone, isolated from the world, separated from it in this exotic enjoyment.

Gradually the embers grew paler; the figures in the tapestry more shadowy; the columned and curtained bed loomed out vaguer; the room seemed to fill with greyness; and my eyes wandered to the mullioned bow-window, beyond whose panes, between whose heavy stone-work, stretched a greyish-brown expanse of sere and sodden park grass, dotted with big oaks; while far off, behind a jagged fringe of dark Scotch firs, the wet sky was suffused with the blood-red of the sunset. Between the falling of the raindrops from the ivy outside, there came, fainter or sharper, the recurring bleating of the lambs, separated from their mothers, a forlorn, quavering, eerie little cry.

I started up at a sudden rap at my door.

"Haven't you heard the gong for dinner?" asked Mr. Oke's voice.

I had completely forgotten his existence.

III

I feel that I cannot possibly reconstruct my earliest impressions of Mrs. Oke. My recollection of them would

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be entirely coloured by my subsequent knowledge of her; when I conclude that I could not at first have experienced the strange interest and admiration which that extraordinary woman very soon excited in me. Interest and admiration, be it well understood, of a very unusual kind, as she was herself a very unusual kind of woman; and I, if you choose, am a rather unusual kind of man. But I can explain that better anon.

This much is certain, that I must have been immeasurably surprised at finding my hostess and future sitter so completely unlike everything I had anticipated. Or now I come to think of it, I scarcely felt surprised at all; or if I did, that shock of surprise could have lasted but an infinitesimal part of a minute. The fact is, that, having once seen Alice Oke in the reality, it was quite impossible to remember that one could have fancied her at all different: there was something so complete, so completely unlike every one else, in her personality, that she seemed always to have been present in one's consciousness, although present, perhaps, as an enigma.

Let me try and give you some notion of her: not that first impression, whatever it may have been, but the absolute reality of her as I gradually learned to see it. To begin with, I must repeat and reiterate over and over again, that she was, beyond all comparison, the most graceful and exquisite woman I have ever seen, but with a grace and an exquisiteness that had nothing to do with any preconceived notion or previous experience of what goes by these names: grace and exquisiteness recognised at once as perfect, but which were seen in her for the first, and probably, I do believe, for the last time. It is conceivable, is it not, that once in a thousand years there may arise a combination of lines, a system of movements, an outline, a gesture, which is new, unprecedented, and yet hits off exactly our desires for beauty and rare-

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ness? She was very tall; and I suppose people would have called her thin. I don't know, for I never thought about her as a body—bones, flesh, that sort of thing; but merely as a wonderful series of lines, and a wonderful strangeness of personality. Tall and slender, certainly, and with not one item of what makes up our notion of a well-built woman. She was as straight—I mean, she had as little of what people call figure—as a bamboo; her shoulders were a trifle high, and she had a decided stoop; her arms and her shoulders she never once wore uncovered. But this bamboo figure of hers had a suppleness and a stateliness, a play of outline with every step she took, that I can't compare to anything else; there was in it something of the peacock and something also of the stag; but, above all, it was her own. I wish I could describe her. I wish, alas!—I wish, I wish, I have wished a hundred thousand times—I could paint her, as I see her now, if I shut my eyes—even if it were only a silhouette. There! I see her so plainly, walking slowly up and down a room, the slight highness of her shoulders just completing the exquisite arrangement of lines made by the straight supple back, the long exquisite neck, the head, with the hair cropped in short pale curls, always drooping a little, except when she would suddenly throw it back, and smile, not at me, nor at any one, nor at anything that had been said, but as if she alone had suddenly seen or heard something, with the strange dimple in her thin, pale cheeks, and the strange whiteness in her full, wide-opened eyes: the moment when she had something of the stag in her movement. But where is the use of talking about her? I don't believe, you know, that even the greatest painter can show what is the real beauty of a very beautiful woman in the ordinary sense: Titian's and Tintoretto's women must have been miles handsomer than they have made them. Something—and that the

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very essence—always escapes, perhaps because real beauty is as much a thing in time—a thing like music, a succession, a series—as in space. Mind you, I am speaking of a woman beautiful in the conventional sense. Imagine, then, how much more so in the case of a woman like Alice Oke; and if the pencil and brush, imitating each line and tint, can't succeed, how is it possible to give even the vaguest notion with mere wretched words—words possessing only a wretched abstract meaning, an impotent conventional association? To make a long story short, Mrs. Oke of Okehurst was, in my opinion, to the highest degree exquisite and strange,—an exotic creature, whose charm you can no more describe than you could bring home the perfume of some newly discovered tropical flower by comparing it with the scent of a cabbage-rose or a lily.

That first dinner was gloomy enough. Mr. Oke—Oke of Okehurst, as the people down there called him—was horribly shy, consumed with a fear of making a fool of himself before me and his wife, I then thought. But that sort of shyness did not wear off; and I soon discovered that, although it was doubtless increased by the presence of a total stranger, it was inspired in Oke, not by me, but by his wife. He would look every now and then as if he were going to make a remark, and then evidently restrain himself, and remain silent. It was very curious to see this big, handsome, manly young fellow, who ought to have had any amount of success with women, suddenly stammer and grow crimson in the presence of his own wife. Nor was it the consciousness of stupidity; for when you got him alone, Oke, although always slow and timid, had a certain amount of ideas, and very defined political and social views, and a certain childlike earnestness and desire to attain certainty and truth which was rather touching. On the other hand, Oke's singular shy-

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ness was not, so far as I could see, the result of any kind of bullying on his wife's part. You can always detect, if you have any observation, the husband or the wife who is accustomed to be snubbed, to be corrected, by his or her better-half: there is a self-consciousness in both parties, a habit of watching and fault-finding, of being watched and found fault with. This was clearly not the case at Okehurst. Mrs. Oke evidently did not trouble herself about her husband in the very least; he might say or do any amount of silly things without rebuke or even notice; and he might have done so, had he chosen, ever since his wedding-day. You felt that at once. Mrs. Oke simply passed over his existence. I cannot say she paid much attention to any one's, even to mine. At first I thought it an affectation on her part—for there was something far-fetched in her whole appearance, something suggesting study, which might lead one to tax her with affectation at first; she was dressed in a strange way, not according to any established æsthetic eccentricity, but individually, strangely, as if in the clothes of an ancestress of the seventeenth century. Well, at first I thought it a kind of pose on her part, this mixture of extreme graciousness and utter indifference which she manifested towards me. She always seemed to be thinking of something else; and although she talked quite sufficiently, and with every sign of superior intelligence, she left the impression of having been as taciturn as her husband.

In the beginning, in the first few days of my stay at Okehurst, I imagined that Mrs. Oke was a highly superior sort of flirt; and that her absent manner, her look, while speaking to you, into an invisible distance, her curious irrelevant smile, were so many means of attracting and baffling adoration. I mistook it for the somewhat similar manners of certain foreign women—it is beyond English

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ones—which mean, to those who can understand, “pay court to me.” But I soon found I was mistaken. Mrs. Oke had not the faintest desire that I should pay court to her; indeed she did not honour me with sufficient thought for that; and I, on my part, began to be too much interested in her from another point of view to dream of such a thing. I became aware, not merely that I had before me the most marvellously rare and exquisite and baffling subject for a portrait, but also one of the most peculiar and enigmatic of characters. Now that I look back upon it, I am tempted to think that the psychological peculiarity of that woman might be summed up in an exorbitant and absorbing interest in herself—a Narcissus attitude—curiously complicated with a fantastic imagination, a sort of morbid day-dreaming, all turned inwards, and with no outer characteristic save a certain restlessness, a perverse desire to surprise and shock, to surprise and shock more particularly her husband, and thus be revenged for the intense boredom which his want of appreciation inflicted upon her.

I got to understand this much little by little, yet I did not seem to have really penetrated the something mysterious about Mrs. Oke. There was a waywardness, a strangeness, which I felt but could not explain—a something as difficult to define as the peculiarity of her outward appearance, and perhaps very closely connected therewith. I became interested in Mrs. Oke as if I had been in love with her; and I was not in the least in love. I neither dreaded parting from her, nor felt any pleasure in her presence. I had not the smallest wish to please or to gain her notice. But I had her on the brain. I pursued her, her physical image, her psychological explanation, with a kind of passion which filled my days, and prevented my ever feeling dull. The Okes lived a remarkably solitary life. There were but few neighbours, of whom

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they saw but little; and they rarely had a guest in the house. Oke himself seemed every now and then seized with a sense of responsibility towards me. He would remark vaguely, during our walks and after-dinner chats, that I must find life at Okehurst horribly dull; his wife's health had accustomed him to solitude and then also his wife thought the neighbours a bore. He never questioned his wife's judgment in these matters. He merely stated the case as if resignation were quite simple and inevitable; yet it seemed to me, sometimes, that this monotonous life of solitude, by the side of a woman who took no more heed of him than of a table or chair, was producing a vague depression and irritation in this young man, so evidently cut out for a cheerful, commonplace life. I often wondered how he could endure it at all, not having, as I had the interest of a strange psychological riddle to solve, and of a great portrait to paint. He was, I found, extremely good,—the type of the perfectly conscientious young Englishman, the sort of man who ought to have been the Christian soldier kind of thing; devout, pure-minded, brave, incapable of any baseness, a little intellectually dense, and puzzled by all manner of moral scruples. The condition of his tenants and of his political party—he was a regular Kentish Tory—lay heavy on his mind. He spent hours every day in his study doing the work of a land agent and a political whip, reading piles of reports and newspapers and agricultural treatises; and emerging for lunch with piles of letters in his hand, and that odd puzzled look in his good healthy face, that deep gash between his eyebrows, which my friend the mad-doctor calls the *maniac-frown*. It was with this expression of face that I should have liked to paint him; but I felt that he would not have liked it, that it was more fair to him to represent him in his mere wholesome pink and white and blond conventionality. I was perhaps rather

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unconscientious about the likeness of Mr. Oke; I felt satisfied to paint it no matter how, I mean as regards character, for my whole mind was swallowed up in thinking how I should paint Mrs. Oke, how I could best transport on to canvas that singular and enigmatic personality. I began with her husband, and told her frankly that I must have much longer to study her. Mr. Oke couldn't understand why it should be necessary to make a hundred and one pencil-sketches of his wife before even determining in what attitude to paint her; but I think he was rather pleased to have an opportunity of keeping me at Okehurst; my presence evidently broke the monotony of his life. Mrs. Oke seemed perfectly indifferent to my staying, as she was perfectly indifferent to my presence. Without being rude, I never saw a woman pay so little attention to a guest; she would talk with me sometimes by the hour, or rather let me talk to her, but she never seemed to be listening. She would lie back in a big seventeenth-century arm-chair while I played the piano, with that strange smile every now and then in her thin cheeks, that strange whiteness in her eyes; but it seemed a matter of indifference whether my music stopped or went on. In my portrait of her husband she did not take, or pretend to take, the very faintest interest; but that was nothing to me. I did not want Mrs. Oke to think me interesting; I merely wished to go on studying her.

The first time that Mrs. Oke seemed to become at all aware of my presence as distinguished from that of the chairs and tables, the dogs that lay in the porch, or the clergyman or lawyer or stray neighbour who was occasionally asked to dinner, was one day—I might have been there a week—when I chanced to remark to her upon the very singular resemblance that existed between herself and the portrait of a lady that hung in the hall with the ceiling like a ship's hull. The picture in question

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was a full length, neither very good nor very bad, probably done by some stray Italian of the early seventeenth century. It hung in a rather dark corner, facing the portrait, evidently painted to be its companion, of a dark man, with a somewhat unpleasant expression of resolution and efficiency, in a black Vandyck dress. The two were evidently man and wife; and in the corner of the woman's portrait were the words, "Alice Oke, daughter of Virgil Pomfret, Esq., and wife of Nicholas Oke of Okehurst," and the date 1626—"Nicholas Oke" being the name painted in the corner of the small portrait. The lady was really wonderfully like the present Mrs. Oke, at least so far as an indifferently painted portrait of the early days of Charles I can be like a living woman of the nineteenth century. There were the same strange lines of figure and face, the same dimples in the thin cheeks, the same wide-opened eyes, the same vague eccentricity of expression, not destroyed even by the feeble painting and conventional manner of the time. One could fancy that this woman had the same walk, the same beautiful line of nape of the neck and stooping head as her descendant; for I found that Mr. and Mrs. Oke, who were first cousins, were both descended from that Nicholas Oke and that Alice, daughter of Virgil Pomfret. But the resemblance was heightened by the fact that, as I soon saw, the present Mrs. Oke distinctly made herself up to look like her ancestress, dressing in garments that had a seventeenth-century look; nay, that were sometimes absolutely copied from this portrait.

"You think I am like her," answered Mrs. Oke dreamily to my remark, and her eyes wandered off to that unseen something, and the faint smile dimpled her thin cheeks.

"You are like her, and you know it. I may even say you wish to be like her, Mrs. Oke," I answered, laughing.

"Perhaps I do."

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And she looked in the direction of her husband. I noticed that he had an expression of distinct annoyance besides that frown of his.

"Isn't it true that Mrs. Oke tries to look like that portrait?" I asked, with a perverse curiosity.

"Oh, fudge!" he exclaimed, rising from his chair and walking nervously to the window. "It's all nonsense, mere nonsense. I wish you wouldn't, Alice."

"Wouldn't what?" asked Mrs. Oke, with a sort of contemptuous indifference. "If I am like that Alice Oke, why I am; and I am very pleased any one should think so. She and her husband are just about the only two members of our family—our most flat, stale, and unprofitable family—that ever were in the least degree interesting."

Oke grew crimson, and frowned as if in pain.

"I don't see why you should abuse our family, Alice," he said. "Thank God, our people have always been honourable and upright men and women!"

"Excepting always Nicholas Oke and Alice his wife, daughter of Virgil Pomfret, Esq.," she answered, laughing, as he strode out into the park.

"How childish he is!" she exclaimed when we were alone. "He really minds, really feels disgraced by what our ancestors did two centuries and a half ago. I do believe William would have those two portraits taken down and burned if he weren't afraid of me and ashamed of the neighbours. And as it is, these two people really are the only two members of our family that ever were in the least interesting. I will tell you the story some day."

As it was, the story was told to me by Oke himself. The next day, as we were taking our morning walk, he suddenly broke a long silence, laying about him all the time at the sere grasses with the hooked stick that he carried, like the conscientious Kentishman he was, for the purpose of cutting down his and other folk's thistles.

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"I fear you must have thought me very ill-mannered towards my wife yesterday," he said shyly; "and indeed I know I was."

Oke was one of those chivalrous beings to whom every woman, every wife—and his own most of all—appeared in the light of something holy. "But—but—I have a prejudice which my wife does not enter into, about raking up ugly things in one's own family. I suppose Alice thinks that it is so long ago that it has really got no connection with us; she thinks of it merely as a picturesque story. I daresay many people feel like that; in short, I am sure they do, otherwise there wouldn't be such lots of discreditable family traditions afloat. But I feel as if it were all one whether it was long ago or not; when it's a question of one's own people, I would rather have it forgotten. I can't understand how people can talk about murders in their families, and ghosts, and so forth."

"Have you any ghosts at Okehurst, by the way?" I asked. The place seemed as if it required some to complete it.

"I hope not," answered Oke gravely. His gravity made me smile.

"Why, would you dislike it if there were?" I asked.

"If there are such things as ghosts," he replied, "I don't think they should be taken lightly. God would not permit them to be, except as a warning or a punishment."

We walked on some time in silence, I wondering at the strange type of this commonplace young man, and half wishing I could put something into my portrait that should be the equivalent of this curious, unimaginative earnestness. Then Oke told me the story of those two pictures—told it me about as badly and hesitatingly as was possible for mortal man.

He and his wife were, as I have said, cousins, and therefore descended from the same old Kentish stock. The

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Okes of Okehurst could trace back to Norman, almost to Saxon times, far longer than any of the titled or better-known families of the neighbourhood. I saw that William Oke, in his heart, thoroughly looked down upon all his neighbours. "We have never done anything particular, or been anything particular—never held any office," he said; "but we have always been here, and apparently always done our duty. An ancestor of ours was killed in the Scotch wars, another at Agincourt—mere honest captains." Well, early in the seventeenth century, the family had dwindled to a single member, Nicholas Oke, the same who had rebuilt Okehurst in its present shape. This Nicholas appears to have been somewhat different from the usual run of the family. He had, in his youth, sought adventures in America, and seems, generally speaking, to have been less of a nonentity than his ancestors. He married, when no longer very young, Alice, daughter of Virgil Pomfret, a beautiful young heiress from a neighbouring county. "It was the first time an Oke married a Pomfret," my host informed me, "and the last time. The Pomfrets were quite different sort of people—restless, self-seeking, one of them had been a favourite of Henry VIII." It was clear that William Oke had no feeling of having any Pomfret blood in his veins; he spoke of these people with an evident family dislike—the dislike of an Oke, one of the old, honourable, modest stock, which had quietly done its duty, for a family of fortune-seekers and Court minions. Well, there had come to live near Okehurst, in a little house recently inherited from an uncle, a certain Christopher Lovelock, a young gallant and poet, who was in momentary disgrace at Court for some love affair. This Lovelock had struck up a great friendship with his neighbours of Okehurst—too great a friendship, apparently, with the wife, either for her husband's taste or her own. Anyhow, one evening as

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he was riding home alone, Lovelock had been attacked and murdered, ostensibly by highwaymen, but as was afterwards rumoured, by Nicholas Oke, accompanied by his wife dressed as a groom. No legal evidence had been got, but the tradition had remained. "They used to tell it us when we were children," said my host, in a hoarse voice, "and to frighten my cousin—I mean my wife—and me with stories about Lovelock. It is merely a tradition, which I hope may die out, as I sincerely pray to heaven that it may be false." "Alice—Mrs. Oke—you see," he went on after some time, "doesn't feel about it as I do. Perhaps I am morbid. But I do dislike having the old story raked up."

And we said no more on the subject.

IV

From that moment I began to assume a certain interest in the eyes of Mrs. Oke; or rather, I began to perceive I had a means of securing her attention. Perhaps it was wrong of me to do so; and I have often reproached myself very seriously later on. But after all, how was I to guess that I was making mischief merely by chiming in, for the sake of the portrait I had undertaken, and of a very harmless psychological mania, with what was merely the fad, the little romantic affectation or eccentricity, of a scatter-brained and eccentric young woman? How in the world should I have dreamed that I was handling explosive substances? A man is surely not responsible if the people with whom he is forced to deal, and whom he deals with as with all the rest of the world, are quite different from all other human creatures.

So, if indeed I did at all conduce to mischief, I really cannot blame myself. I had met in Mrs. Oke an almost unique subject for a portrait-painter of my particular sort, and a most singular, *bizarre* personality. I could not

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possibly do my subject justice so long as I was kept at a distance, prevented from studying the real character of the woman. I required to put her into play. And I ask you whether any more innocent way of doing so could be found than talking to a woman, and letting her talk, about an absurd fancy she had for a couple of ancestors of hers of the time of Charles I, and a poet whom they had murdered?—particularly as I studiously respected the prejudices of my host, and refrained from mentioning the matter, and tried to restrain Mrs. Oke from doing so, in the presence of William Oke himself.

I had certainly guessed correctly. To resemble the Alice Oke of the year 1626 was the caprice, the mania, the pose, the whatever you may call it, of the Alice Oke of 1880; and to perceive this resemblance was the sure way of gaining her good graces. It was the most extraordinary craze, of all the extraordinary crazes of childless and idle women, that I had ever met; but it was more than that, it was admirably characteristic. It finished off the strange figure of Mrs. Oke, as I saw it in my imagination—this *bizarre* creature of enigmatic, far-fetched exquisiteness—that she should have no interest in the present, but only an eccentric passion in the past. It seemed to give the meaning to the absent look in her eyes, to her irrelevant and far-off smile. It was like the words to a weird piece of gipsy music, this that she, who was so different, so distant from all women of her own time, should try and identify herself with a woman of the past—that she should have a kind of flirtation—But of this anon.

I told Mrs. Oke that I had learnt from her husband the outline of the tragedy, or mystery, whichever it was, of Alice Oke, daughter of Virgil Pomfret, and the poet Christopher Lovelock. That look of vague contempt, of a

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desire to shock, which I had noticed before, came into her beautiful, pale, diaphanous face.

"I suppose my husband was very shocked at the whole matter," she said—"told it you with as little detail as possible, and assured you very solemnly that he hoped the whole story might be a mere dreadful calumny? Poor Willie! I remember already when we were children, and I used to come with my mother to spend Christmas at Okehurst, and my cousin was down here for his holidays, how I used to horrify him by insisting upon dressing up in shawls and waterproofs, and playing the story of the wicked Mrs. Oke; and he always piously refused to do the part of Nicholas, when I wanted to have the scene on Cotes Common. I didn't know then that I was like the original Alice Oke; I found it out only after our marriage. You really think that I am?"

She certainly was, particularly at that moment, as she stood in a white Vandyck dress, with the green of the park-land rising up behind her, and the low sun catching her short locks and surrounding her head, her exquisitely bowed head, with a pale-yellow halo. But I confess I thought the original Alice Oke, siren and murderess though she might be, very uninteresting compared with this wayward and exquisite creature whom I had rashly promised myself to send down to posterity in all her unlikely wayward exquisiteness.

One morning while Mr. Oke was despatching his Saturday heap of Conservative manifestoes and rural decisions—he was justice of the peace in a most literal sense, penetrating into cottages and huts, defending the weak and admonishing the ill-conducted—one morning while I was making one of my many pencil-sketches (alas, they are all that remain to me now!) of my future sitter, Mrs. Oke gave me her version of the story of Alice Oke and Christopher Lovelock.

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"Do you suppose there was anything between them?" I asked—"that she was ever in love with him? How do you explain the part which tradition ascribes to her in the supposed murder? One has heard of women and their lovers who have killed the husband; but a woman who combines with her husband to kill her lover, or at least the man who is in love with her—that is surely very singular." I was absorbed in my drawing, and really thinking very little of what I was saying.

"I don't know," she answered pensively, with that distant look in her eyes. "Alice Oke was very proud, I am sure. She may have loved the poet very much, and yet been indignant with him, hated having to love him. She may have felt that she had a right to rid herself of him, and to call upon her husband to help her to do so."

"Good heavens! what a fearful idea!" I exclaimed, half laughing. "Don't you think, after all, that Mr. Oke may be right in saying that it is easier and more comfortable to take the whole story as a pure invention?"

"I cannot take it as an invention," answered Mrs. Oke contemptuously, "because I happen to know that it is true."

"Indeed!" I answered, working away at my sketch, and enjoying putting this strange creature, as I said to myself, through her paces; "how is that?"

"How does one know that anything is true in this world?" she replied evasively; "because one does, because one feels it to be true, I suppose."

And, with that far-off look in her light eyes, she relapsed into silence.

"Have you ever read any of Lovelock's poetry?" she asked me suddenly the next day.

"Lovelock?" I answered, for I had forgotten the name. "Lovelock, who"—But I stopped, remembering the

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prejudices of my host, who was seated next to me at table.

"Lovelock who was killed by Mr. Oke's and my ancestors."

And she looked full at her husband as if in perverse enjoyment of the evident annoyance which it caused him.

"Alice," he entreated in a low voice, his whole face crimson, "for mercy's sake, don't talk about such things before the servants."

Mrs. Oke burst into a high, light, rather hysterical laugh, the laugh of a naughty child.

"The servants! Gracious heavens! do you suppose they haven't heard the story? Why, it's as well known as Okehurst itself in the neighbourhood. Don't they believe that Lovelock has been seen about the house? Haven't they all heard his footsteps in the big corridor? Haven't they, my dear Willie, noticed a thousand times that you never will stay a minute alone in the yellow drawing-room --that you run out of it, like a child, if I happen to leave you there for a minute?"

True! How was it I had not noticed that? or rather, that I only now remembered having noticed it? The yellow drawing-room was one of the most charming rooms in the house: a large, bright room, hung with yellow damask and panelled with carvings, that opened straight out on to the lawn, far superior to the room in which we habitually sat, which was comparatively gloomy. This time Mr. Oke struck me as really too childish. I felt an intense desire to badger him.

"The yellow drawing-room!" I exclaimed. "Does this interesting literary character haunt the yellow drawing-room? Do tell me about it. What happened there?"

Mr. Oke made a painful effort to laugh.

"Nothing ever happened there, so far as I know," he said, and rose from the table.

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"Really?" I asked incredulously.

"Nothing did happen there," answered Mrs. Oke slowly, playing mechanically with a fork, and picking out the pattern of the tablecloth. "That is just the extraordinary circumstance, that, so far as any one knows, nothing ever did happen there; and yet that room has an evil reputation. No member of our family, they say, can bear to sit there alone for more than a minute. You see, William evidently cannot."

"Have you ever seen or heard anything strange there?" I asked of my host.

He shook his head. "Nothing," he answered curtly, and lit his cigar.

"I presume you have not," I asked, half laughing, of Mrs. Oke, "since you don't mind sitting in that room for hours alone? How do you explain this uncanny reputation, since nothing ever happened there?"

"Perhaps something is destined to happen there in the future," she answered, in her absent voice. And then she suddenly added, "Suppose you paint my portrait in that room?"

Mr. Oke suddenly turned round. He was very white, and looked as if he were going to say something, but desisted.

"Why do you worry Mr. Oke like that?" I asked, when he had gone into his smoking-room with his usual bundle of papers. "It is very cruel of you, Mrs. Oke. You ought to have more consideration for people who believe in such things, although you may not be able to put yourself in their frame of mind."

"Who tells you that I don't believe in *such things*, as you call them?" she answered abruptly.

"Come," she said, after a minute, "I want to show you why I believe in Christopher Lovelock. Come with me into the yellow room."

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V

What Mrs. Oke showed me in the yellow room was a large bundle of papers, some printed and some manuscript, but all of them brown with age, which she took out of an old Italian ebony inlaid cabinet. It took her some time to get them, as a complicated arrangement of double locks and false drawers had to be put in play; and while she was doing so, I looked round the room, in which I had been only three or four times before. It was certainly the most beautiful room in this beautiful house, and, as it seemed to me now, the most strange. It was long and low, with something that made you think of the cabin of a ship, with a great mullioned window that let in, as it were, a perspective of the brownish-green park-land, dotted with oaks, and sloping upwards to the distant line of bluish firs against the horizon. The walls were hung with flowered damask, whose yellow, faded to brown, united with the reddish colour of the carved wainscoting and the carved oaken beams. For the rest, it reminded me more of an Italian room than an English one. The furniture was Tuscan of the early seventeenth century, inlaid and carved; there were a couple of faded allegorical pictures, by some Bolognese master, on the walls; and in a corner, among a stack of dwarf orange-trees, a little Italian harpsichord of exquisite curve and slenderness, with flowers and landscapes painted upon its cover. In a recess was a shelf of old books, mainly English and Italian poets of the Elizabethan time; and close by it, placed upon a carved wedding-chest, a large and beautiful melon-shaped lute. The panes of the mullioned window were open, and yet the air seemed heavy, with an indescribable heady perfume, not that of any growing flower, but like that of old stuff that should have lain for years among spices.

"It is a beautiful room!" I exclaimed. "I should awfully like to paint you in it;" but I had scarcely spoken

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the words when I felt I had done wrong. This woman's husband could not bear the room, and it seemed to me vaguely as if he were right in detesting it.

Mrs. Oke took no notice of my exclamation, but beckoned me to the table where she was standing sorting the papers.

"Look!" she said, "these are all poems by Christopher Lovelock;" and touching the yellow papers with delicate and reverent fingers, she commenced reading some of them out loud in a slow, half-audible voice. They were songs in the style of those of Herrick, Waller, and Drayton, complaining for the most part of the cruelty of a lady called Dryope, in whose name was evidently concealed a reference to that of the mistress of Okehurst. The songs were graceful, and not without a certain faded passion; but I was thinking not of them, but of the woman who was reading them to me.

Mrs. Oke was standing with the brownish-yellow wall as a background to her white brocade dress, which, in its stiff seventeenth-century make, seemed but to bring out more clearly the slightness, the exquisite suppleness, of her tall figure. She held the papers in one hand, and leaned the other, as if for support, on the inlaid cabinet by her side. Her voice, which was delicate, shadowy, like her person, had a curious throbbing cadence, as if she were reading the words of a melody, and restraining herself with difficulty from singing it; and as she read, her long slender throat throbbed slightly, and a faint redness came into her thin face. She evidently knew the verses by heart, and her eyes were mostly fixed with that distant smile in them, with which harmonised a constant tremulous little smile in her lips.

"That is how I would wish to paint her!" I exclaimed within myself; and scarcely noticed, what struck me on thinking over the scene, that this strange being read these

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verses as one might fancy a woman would read love-verses addressed to herself.

"Those are all written for Alice Oke—Alice the daughter of Virgil Pomfret," she said slowly, folding up the papers. I found them at the bottom of this cabinet. Can you doubt of the reality of Christopher Lovelock now?"

The question was an illogical one, for to doubt of the existence of Christopher Lovelock was one thing, and to doubt of the mode of his death was another; but somehow I did feel convinced.

"Look!" she said, when she had replaced the poems, "I will show you something else." Among the flowers that stood on the upper storey of her writing-table—for I found that Mrs. Oke had a writing-table in the yellow room—stood, as on an altar, a small black carved frame, with a silk curtain drawn over it: the sort of thing behind which you would have expected to find a head of Christ or of the Virgin Mary. She drew the curtain and displayed a large-sized miniature, representing a young man, with auburn curls and a peaked auburn beard, dressed in black, but with lace about his neck, and large pear-shaped pearls in his ears: a wistful, melancholy face. Mrs. Oke took the miniature religiously off its stand, and showed me, written in faded characters upon the back, the name "Christopher Lovelock," and the date 1626.

"I found this in the secret drawer of that cabinet, together with the heap of poems," she said, taking the miniature out of my hand.

I was silent for a minute.

"Does—does Mr. Oke know that you have got it here?" I asked; and then wondered what in the world had impelled me to put such a question.

Mrs. Oke smiled that smile of contemptuous indifference. "I have never hidden it from any one. If my husband

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disliked my having it, he might have taken it away, I suppose. It belongs to him, since it was found in his house."

I did not answer, but walked mechanically towards the door. There was something heady and oppressive in this beautiful room; something, I thought, almost repulsive in this exquisite woman. She seemed to me, suddenly, perverse and dangerous.

I scarcely know why, but I neglected Mrs. Oke that afternoon. I went to Mr. Oke's study, and sat opposite to him smoking while he was engrossed in his accounts, his reports, and electioneering papers. On the table, above the heap of paper-bound volumes and pigeon-holed documents, was, as sole ornament of his den, a little photograph of his wife, done some years before. I don't know why, but as I sat and watched him, with his florid, honest, manly beauty, working away conscientiously, with that little perplexed frown of his, I felt intensely sorry for this man.

But this feeling did not last. There was no help for it: Oke was not as interesting as Mrs. Oke; and it required too great an effort to pump up sympathy for this normal, excellent, exemplary young squire, in the presence of so wonderful a creature as his wife. So I let myself go to the habit of allowing Mrs. Oke daily to talk over her strange craze, or rather of drawing her out about it. I confess that I derived a morbid and exquisite pleasure in doing so: it was so characteristic in her, so appropriate to the house! It completed her personality so perfectly, and made it so much easier to conceive a way of painting her. I made up my mind little by little, while working at William Oke's portrait (he proved a less easy subject than I had anticipated, and, despite his conscientious efforts, was a nervous, uncomfortable sitter, silent and brooding)—I made up my mind that I would paint Mrs.

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Oke standing by the cabinet in the yellow room, in the white Vandyck dress copied from the portrait of her ancestress. Mr. Oke might resent it, Mrs. Oke even might resent it; they might refuse to take the picture, to pay for it, to allow me to exhibit; they might force me to run my umbrella through the picture. No matter. That picture should be painted, if merely for the sake of having painted it; for I felt it was the only thing I could do, and that it would be far away my best work. I told neither of my resolution, but prepared sketch after sketch of Mrs. Oke, while continuing to paint her husband.

Mrs. Oke was a silent person, more silent even than her husband, for she did not feel bound, as he did, to attempt to entertain a guest or to show any interest in him. She seemed to spend her life—a curious, inactive, half-invalidish life, broken by sudden fits of childish cheerfulness—in an eternal day-dream, strolling about the house and grounds, arranging the quantities of flowers that always filled all the rooms, beginning to read and then throwing aside novels and books of poetry, of which she always had a large number; and, I believe, lying for hours, doing nothing, on a couch in that yellow drawing-room, which, with her sole exception, no member of the Oke family had ever been known to stay in alone. Little by little I began to suspect and to verify another eccentricity of this eccentric being, and to understand why there were stringent orders never to disturb her in that yellow room.

It had been a habit at Okehurst, as at one or two other English manor-houses, to keep a certain amount of the clothes of each generation, more particularly wedding-dresses. A certain carved oaken press, of which Mr. Oke once displayed the contents to me, was a perfect museum of costumes, male and female, from the early years of the seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century—a thing to take away the breath of a *bric-a-brac* collector, an

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antiquary, or a *genre* painter. Mr. Oke was none of these, and therefore took but little interest in the collection, save in so far as it interested his family feeling. Still, he seemed well acquainted with the contents of that press.

He was turning over the clothes for my benefit, when suddenly I noticed that he frowned. I know not what impelled me to say, "By the way, have you any dresses of that Mrs. Oke whom your wife resembles so much?" Have you got that particular white dress she was painted in, perhaps?"

Oke of Okehurst flushed very red.

"We have it," he answered hesitatingly, "but—it isn't here at present—I can't find it. I suppose," he blurted out with an effort, "that Alice has got it. Mrs. Oke sometimes has the fancy of having some of these old things down. I suppose she takes ideas from them."

A sudden light dawned in my mind. The white dress in which I had seen Mrs. Oke in the yellow room, the day that she showed me Lovelock's verses, was not, as I had thought, a modern copy; it was the original dress of Alice Oke, the daughter of Virgil Pomfret—the dress in which, perhaps, Christopher Lovelock had seen her in that very room.

The idea gave me a delightful picturesque shudder. I said nothing. But I pictured to myself Mrs. Oke sitting in that yellow room—that room which no Oke of Okehurst save herself ventured to remain in alone, in the dress of her ancestress, confronting, as it were, that vague, haunting something that seemed to fill the place—that vague presence, it seemed to me, of the murdered cavalier poet.

Mrs. Oke, as I have said, was extremely silent, as a result of being extremely indifferent. She really did not care in the least about anything except her own ideas and day-dreams, except when, every now and then, she was seized with a sudden desire to shock the prejudices or

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superstitions of her husband. Very soon she got into the way of never talking to me at all, save about Alice and Nicholas Oke and Christopher Lovelock; and then, when the fit seized her, she would go on by the hour, never asking herself whether I was or was not equally interested in the strange craze that fascinated her. It so happened that I was. I loved to listen to her, going on discussing by the hour the merits of Lovelock's poems, and analysing her feelings and those of her two ancestors. It was quite wonderful to watch the exquisite, exotic creature in one of these moods, with the distant look in her grey eyes and the absent-looking smile in her thin cheeks, talking as if she had intimately known these people of the seventeenth century, discussing every minute mood of theirs, detailing every scene between them and their victim, talking of Alice, and Nicholas, and Lovelock as she might of her most intimate friends. Of Alice particularly, and of Lovelock. She seemed to know every word that Alice had spoken, every idea that had crossed her mind. It sometimes struck me as if she were telling me, speaking of herself in the third person, of her own feelings—as if I were listening to a woman's confidences, the recital of her doubts, scruples, and agonies about a living lover. For Mrs. Oke, who seemed the most self-absorbed of creatures in all other matters, and utterly incapable of understanding or sympathising with the feelings of other persons, entered completely and passionately into the feelings of this woman, this Alice, who, at some moments, seemed to be not another woman, but herself.

"But how could she do it—how could she kill the man she cared for?" I once asked her.

"Because she loved him more than the whole world!" she exclaimed, and rising suddenly from her chair, walked towards the window, covering her face with her hands.

I could see, from the movements of her neck, that she

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was sobbing. She did not turn round, but motioned me to go away.

"Don't let us talk any more about it," she said. "I am ill to-day, and silly."

I closed the door gently behind me. What mystery was there in this woman's life? This listlessness, this strange self-engrossment and stranger mania about people long dead, this indifference and desire to annoy towards her husband—did it all mean that Alice Oke had loved or still loved some one who was not the master of Okehurst? And this melancholy, his preoccupation, the something about him that told of a broken youth—did it mean that he knew it?

VI

The following days Mrs. Oke was in a condition of quite unusual good spirits. Some visitors—distant relatives—were expected, and although she had expressed the utmost annoyance at the idea of their coming, she was now seized with a fit of housekeeping activity, and was perpetually about arranging things and giving orders, although all arrangements, as usual, had been made, and all orders given, by her husband.

William Oke was quite radiant.

"If only Alice were always well like this!" he exclaimed; "if only she would take, or could take, an interest in life, how different things would be! But," he added, as if fearful lest he should be supposed to accuse her in any way, "how can she, usually, with her wretched health? Still, it does make me awfully happy to see her like this."

I nodded. But I cannot say that I really acquiesced in his views. It seemed to me, particularly with the recollection of yesterday's extraordinary scene, that Mrs. Oke's high spirits were anything but normal. There was some-

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thing in her unusual activity and still more unusual cheerfulness that was merely nervous and feverish; and I had, the whole day, the impression of dealing with a woman who was ill and who would very speedily collapse.

Mrs. Oke spent her day wandering from one room to another, and from the garden to the greenhouse, seeing whether all was in order, when, as a matter of fact, all was always in order at Okehurst. She did not give me any sitting, and not a word was spoken about Alice Oke or Christopher Lovelock. Indeed, to a casual observer, it might have seemed as if all that craze about Lovelock had completely departed, or never existed. About five o'clock, as I was strolling among the red-brick round-gabled out-houses—each with its armorial oak—and the old-fashioned spalliered kitchen and fruit garden, I saw Mrs. Oke standing, her hands full of York and Lancaster roses, upon the steps facing the stables. A groom was currycombing a horse, and outside the coach-house was Mr. Oke's little high-wheeled cart.

"Let us have a drive!" suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Oke, on seeing me. "Look what a beautiful evening—and look at that dear little cart! It is so long since I have driven, and I feel as if I must drive again. Come with me. And you, harness Jim at once and come round to the door."

I was quite amazed; and still more so when the cart drove up before the door, and Mrs. Oke called to me to accompany her. She sent away the groom, and in a minute we were rolling along, at a tremendous pace, along the yellow-sand road, with the sere pasture-lands, the big oaks, on either side.

I could scarcely believe my senses. This woman, in her mannish little coat and hat, driving a powerful young horse with the utmost skill, and chattering like a school-girl of sixteen, could not be the delicate, morbid, exotic, hot-house creature, unable to walk or to do anything,

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who spent her days lying about on couches in the heavy atmosphere, redolent with strange scents and associations, of the yellow drawing-room. The movement of the light carriage, the cool draught, the very grind of the wheels upon the gravel, seemed to go to her head like wine.

"It is so long since I have done this sort of thing," she kept repeating; "so long, so long. Oh, don't you think it delightful, going at this pace, with the idea that any moment the horse may come down and we two be killed?" and she laughed her childish laugh, and turned her face, no longer pale, but flushed with the movement and the excitement, towards me.

The cart rolled on quicker and quicker, one gate after another swinging to behind us, as we flew up and down the little hills, across the pasture lands, through the little red-brick gabled villages, where the people came out to see us pass, past the rows of willows along the streams, and the dark-green compact hop-fields, with the blue and hazy tree-tops of the horizon getting bluer and more hazy as the yellow light began to graze the ground. At last we got to an open space, a high-lying piece of common-land, such as is rare in that ruthlessly utilised country of grazing-grounds and hop-gardens. Among the low hills of the Weald, it seemed quite preternaturally high up, giving a sense that its extent of flat heather and gorse, bound by distant firs, was really on the top of the world. The sun was setting just opposite, and its lights lay flat on the ground, staining it with the red and black of the heather, or rather turning it into the surface of a purple sea, canopied over by a bank of dark-purple clouds—the jet-like sparkle of the dry ling and gorse tipping the purple like the sunlit wavelets. A cold wind swept in our faces.

"What is the name of this place?" I asked. It was the

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only bit of impressive scenery that I had met in the neighbourhood of Okehurst.

"It is called Cotes Common," answered Mrs. Oke, who had slackened the pace of the horse, and let the reins hang loose about his neck. "It was here that Christopher Lovelock was killed."

There was a moment's pause; and then she proceeded, tickling the flies from the horse's ears with the end of her whip, and looking straight into the sunset, which now rolled, a deep purple stream, across the heath to our feet—

"Lovelock was riding home one summer evening from Appledore, when, as he had got half-way across Cotes Common, somewhere about here—for I have always heard them mention the pond in the old gravel-pits as about the place—he saw two men riding towards him, in whom he presently recognised Nicholas Oke of Okehurst accompanied by a groom. Oke of Okehurst hailed him; and Lovelock rode up to meet him. 'I am glad to have met you, Mr. Lovelock,' said Nicholas, 'because I have some important news for you;' and so saying, he brought his horse close to the one that Lovelock was riding, and suddenly turning round, fired off a pistol at his head. Lovelock had time to move, and the bullet, instead of striking him, went straight into the head of his horse, which fell beneath him. Lovelock, however, had fallen in such a way as to be able to extricate himself easily from his horse; and drawing his sword, he rushed upon Oke, and seized his horse by the bridle. Oke quickly jumped off and drew his sword; and in a minute, Lovelock, who was much the better swordsman of the two, was having the better of him. Lovelock had completely disarmed him, and got his sword at Oke's throat, crying out to him that if he would ask forgiveness he should be spared for the sake of their old friendship, when the groom suddenly rode up from behind and shot Lovelock through the back. Lovelock

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fell, and Oke immediately tried to finish him with his sword, while the groom drew up and held the bridle of Oke's horse. At that moment the sunlight fell upon the groom's face, and Lovelock recognised Mrs. Oke. He cried out, 'Alice, Alice! it is you who have murdered me!' and died. Then Nicholas Oke sprang into his saddle and rode off with his wife, leaving Lovelock dead by the side of his fallen horse. Nicholas Oke had taken the precaution of removing Lovelock's purse and throwing it into the pond, so the murder was put down to certain highwaymen who were about in that part of the country. Alice Oke died many years afterwards, quite an old woman, in the reign of Charles II; but Nicholas did not live very long, and shortly before his death got into a very strange condition, always brooding, and sometimes threatening to kill his wife. They say that in one of these fits, just shortly before his death, he told the whole story of the murder, and made a prophecy that when the head of his house and master of Okehurst should marry another Alice Oke, descended from himself and his wife, there should be an end of the Okes of Okehurst. You see, it seems to be coming true. We have no children, and I don't suppose we shall ever have any. I, at least, have never wished for them."

Mrs. Oke paused, and turned her face towards me with the absent smile in her thin cheeks: her eyes no longer had that distant look; they were strangely eager and fixed. I did not know what to answer; this woman positively frightened me. We remained for a moment in that same place, with the sunlight dying away in crimson ripples on the heather, gilding the yellow banks, the black waters of the pond, surrounded by thin rushes, and the yellow gravel-pits; while the wind blew in our faces and bent the ragged, warped, bluish tops of the firs. Then Mrs. Oke touched the horse, and off we went at a furious

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pace. We did not exchange a single word, I think, on the way home. Mrs. Oke sat with her eyes fixed on the reins, breaking the silence now and then only by a word to the horse, urging him to an even more furious pace. The people we met along the roads must have thought that the horse was running away, unless they noticed Mrs. Oke's calm manner and the look of excited enjoyment in her face. To me it seemed that I was in the hands of a madwoman, and I quietly prepared myself for being upset or dashed against a cart. It had turned cold, and the draught was icy in our faces when we got within sight of the red gables and high chimney-stacks of Okehurst. Mr. Oke was standing before the door. On our approach I saw a look of relieved suspense, of keen pleasure come into his face.

He lifted his wife out of the cart in his strong arms with a kind of chivalrous tenderness.

"I am so glad to have you back, darling," he exclaimed—"so glad! I was delighted to hear you had gone out with the cart, but as you have not driven for so long, I was beginning to be frightfully anxious, dearest. Where have you been all this time?"

Mrs. Oke had quickly extricated herself from her husband, who had remained holding her, as one might hold a delicate child who has been causing anxiety. The gentleness and affection of the poor fellow had evidently not touched her—she seemed almost to recoil from it.

"I have taken him to Cotes Common," she said, with that perverse look which I had noticed before, as she pulled off her driving-gloves. "It is such a splendid old place."

Mr. Oke flushed as if he had bitten upon a sore tooth, and the double gash painted itself scarlet between his eyebrows.

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Outside, the mists were beginning to rise, veiling the park-land dotted with big black oaks, and from which, in the watery moonlight, rose on all sides the eerie little cry of the lambs separated from their mothers. It was damp and cold, and I shivered.

VII

The next day Okehurst was full of people, and Mrs. Oke, to my amazement, was doing the honours of it as if a house full of commonplace, noisy young creatures, bent upon flirting and tennis, were her usual idea of felicity.

The afternoon of the third day—they had come for an electioneering ball, and stayed three nights—the weather changed; it turned suddenly very cold and began to pour. Every one was sent indoors, and there was a general gloom suddenly over the company. Mrs. Oke seemed to have got sick of her guests, and was listlessly lying back on a couch, paying not the slightest attention to the chattering and piano-strumming in the room, when one of the guests suddenly proposed that they should play charades. He was a distant cousin of the Okes, a sort of fashionable artistic Bohemian, swelled out to intolerable conceit by the amateur-actor vogue of a season.

“It would be lovely in this marvellous old place,” he cried, “just to dress up, and parade about, and feel as if we belonged to the past. I have heard you have a marvellous collection of old costumes, more or less ever since the days of Noah, somewhere, Cousin Bill.”

The whole party exclaimed in joy at this proposal. William Oke looked puzzled for a moment, and glanced at his wife, who continued to lie listless on her sofa.

“There is a press full of clothes belonging to the family,” he answered dubiously, apparently overwhelmed by the desire to please his guests; “but—but—I don’t know whether it’s quite respectful to dress up in the clothes of dead people.”

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"Oh, fiddlestick!" cried the cousin. "What do the dead people know about it? Besides," he added, with mock seriousness, "I assure you we shall behave in the most reverent way and feel quite solemn about it all, if only you will give us the key, old man."

Again Mr. Oke looked towards his wife, and again met only her vague, absent glance.

"Very well," he said, and led his guests upstairs.

An hour later the house was filled with the strangest crew and the strangest noises. I had entered, to a certain extent, into William Oke's feelings of unwillingness to let his ancestors' clothes and personality be taken in vain; but when the masquerade was complete, I must say that the effect was quite magnificent. A dozen youngish men and women—those who were staying in the house and some neighbours who had come for lawn-tennis and dinner—were rigged out, under the direction of the theatrical cousin, in the contents of that oaken press: and I have never seen a more beautiful sight than the panelled corridors, the carved and escutcheoned staircase, the dim drawing-rooms with their faded tapestries, the great hall with its vaulted and ribbed ceiling, dotted about with groups or single figures that seemed to have come straight from the past. Even William Oke, who, besides myself and a few elderly people, was the only man not masqueraded, seemed delighted and fired by the sight. A certain schoolboy character suddenly came out in him and finding that there was no costume left for him, he rushed upstairs and presently returned in the uniform he had worn before his marriage. I thought I had really never seen so magnificent a specimen of the handsome Englishman; he looked, despite all the modern associations of his costume, more genuinely old-world than all the rest, a knight for the Black Prince or Sidney, with his admirably regular features and beautiful fair hair and complexion. After

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a minute, even the elderly people had got costumes of some sort—dominoes arranged at the moment, and hoods and all manner of disguises made out of pieces of old embroidery and Oriental stuffs and furs; and very soon this rabble of masquers had become, so to speak, completely drunk with its own amusement—with the childishness, and, if I may say so, the barbarism, the vulgarity underlying the majority even of well-bred English men and women—Mr. Oke himself doing the mountebank like a schoolboy at Christmas.

Where is Mrs. Oke? Where is Alice?" some one suddenly asked.

Mrs. Oke had vanished. I could fully understand that to this eccentric being, with her fantastic, imaginative, morbid passion for the past, such a carnival as this must be positively revolting; and, absolutely indifferent as she was to giving offence, I could imagine how she would have retired, disgusted and outraged, to dream her strange day-dreams in the yellow room.

But a moment later, as we were all noisily preparing to go in to dinner, the door opened and a strange figure entered, stranger than any of these others who were profaning the clothes of the dead: a boy, slight and tall, in a brown riding-coat, leathern belt, and big buff boots, a little grey cloak over one shoulder, a large grey hat slouched over the eyes, a dagger and pistol at the waist. It was Mrs. Oke, her eyes preternaturally bright, and her whole face lit up with a bold, perverse smile.

Every one exclaimed, and stood aside. Then there was a moment's silence, broken by faint applause. Even to a crew of noisy boys and girls playing the fool in the garments of men and women long dead and buried, there is something questionable in the sudden appearance of a young married woman, the mistress of the house, in a

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riding-coat and jack-boots; and Mrs. Oke's expression did not make the jest seem any the less questionable.

What is that costume?" asked the theatrical cousin, who, after a second, had come to the conclusion that Mrs. Oke was merely a woman of marvellous talent whom he must try and secure for his amateur troop next season.

"It is the dress in which an ancestress of ours, my namesake Alice Oke, used to go out riding with her husband in the days of Charles I," she answered, and took her seat at the head of the table. Involuntarily my eyes sought those of Oke of Okehurst. He, who blushed as easily as a girl of sixteen, was now as white as ashes, and I noticed that he pressed his hand almost convulsively to his mouth.

"Don't you recognise my dress, William?" asked Mrs. Oke, fixing her eyes upon him with a cruel smile.

He did not answer, and there was a moment's silence, which the theatrical cousin had the happy thought of breaking by jumping upon his seat and emptying off his glass with the exclamation—

"To the health of the two Alice Okes, of the past and the present!"

Mrs. Oke nodded, and with an expression I had never seen in her face before, answered in a loud and aggressive tone—

"To the health of the poet, Mr. Christopher Lovelock, if his ghost be honouring this house with its presence!"

I felt suddenly as if I were in a madhouse. Across the table, in the midst of this room full of noisy wretches, tricked out red, blue, purple, and parti-coloured, as men and women of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, as improvised Turks and Eskimos, and dominoes, and clowns, with faces painted and corked and floured over, I seemed to see that sanguine sunset, washing like a sea of blood over the heather, to where, by the

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black pond and the wind-warped firs, there lay the body of Christopher Lovelock, with his dead horse near him, the yellow gravel and lilac ling soaked crimson all around ; and above emerged, as out of the redness, the pale blond head covered with the grey hat, the absent eyes, and strange smile of Mrs. Oke. It seemed to me horrible, vulgar, abominable, as if I had got inside a madhouse.

VIII

From that moment I noticed a change in William Oke ; or rather, a change that had probably been coming on for some time got to the stage of being noticeable.

I don't know whether he had any words with his wife about her masquerade of that unlucky evening. On the whole I decidedly think not. Oke was with every one a diffident and reserved man, and most of all so with his wife ; besides, I can fancy that he would experience a positive impossibility of putting into words any strong feeling of disapprobation towards her, that his disgust would necessarily be silent. But be this as it may, I perceived very soon that the relations between my host and hostess had become exceedingly strained. Mrs. Oke, indeed, had never paid much attention to her husband, and seemed merely a trifle more indifferent to his presence than she had been before. But Oke himself, although he affected to address her at meals from a desire to conceal his feelings, and a fear of making the position disagreeable to me, very clearly could scarcely bear to speak to or even see his wife. The poor fellow's honest soul was quite brimful of pain, which he was determined not to allow to overflow, and which seemed to filter into his whole nature and poison it. This woman had shocked and pained him more than was possible to say, and yet it was evident that he could neither cease loving her nor commence comprehending her real nature. I sometimes felt, as we took

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our long walks through the monotonous country, across the oak-dotted grazing-grounds, and by the brink of the dull-green, serried hop-rows, talking at rare intervals about the value of the crops, the drainage of the estate, the village schools, the Primrose League, and the iniquities of Mr. Gladstone, while Oke of Okehurst carefully cut down every tall thistle that caught his eye—I sometimes felt, I say, an intense and impotent desire to enlighten this man about his wife's character. I seemed to understand it so well, and to understand it well seemed to imply such a comfortable acquiescence; and it seemed so unfair that just he should be condemned to puzzle for ever over this enigma, and wear out his soul trying to comprehend what now seemed so plain to me. But how would it ever be possible to get this serious, conscientious, slow-brained representative of English simplicity and honesty and thoroughness to understand the mixture of self-engrossed vanity, of shallowness, of poetic vision, of love of morbid excitement, that walked this earth under the name of Alice Oke?

So Oke of Okehurst was condemned never to understand; but he was condemned also to suffer from his inability to do so. The poor fellow was constantly straining after an explanation of his wife's peculiarities; and although the effort was probably unconscious, it caused him a great deal of pain. The gash—the maniac-frown, as my friend calls it—between his eyebrows, seemed to have grown a permanent feature of his face.

Mrs. Oke, on her side, was making the very worst of the situation. Perhaps she resented her husband's tacit reproval of that masquerade night's freak, and determined to make him swallow more of the same stuff, for she clearly thought that one of William's peculiarities, and one for which she despised him, was that he could never be goaded into an outspoken expression of disapproba-

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tion; that from her he would swallow any amount of bitterness without complaining. At any rate she now adopted a perfect policy of teasing and shocking her husband about the murder of Lovelock. She was perpetually alluding to it in her conversation, discussing in his presence what had or had not been the feelings of the various actors in the tragedy of 1626, and insisting upon her resemblance and almost identity with the original Alice Oke. Something had suggested to her eccentric mind that it would be delightful to perform in the garden at Okehurst, under the huge ilexes and elms, a little masque which she had discovered among Christopher Lovelock's works; and she began to scour the country and enter into vast correspondence for the purpose of effectuating this scheme. Letters arrived every other day from the theatrical cousin, whose only objection was that Okehurst was too remote a locality for an entertainment in which he foresaw great glory to himself. And every now and then there would arrive some young gentleman or lady, whom Alice Oke had sent for to see whether they would do.

I saw very plainly that the performance would never take place, and that Mrs. Oke herself had no intention that it ever should. She was one of those creatures to whom realisation of a project is nothing, and who enjoy plan-making almost the more for knowing that all will stop short at the plan. Meanwhile, this perpetual talk about the pastoral, about Lovelock, this continual attitudinising as the wife of Nicholas Oke, had the further attraction to Mrs. Oke of putting her husband into a condition of frightful though suppressed irritation, which she enjoyed with the enjoyment of a perverse child. You must not think that I looked on indifferent, although I admit that this was a perfect treat to an amateur student of character like myself. I really did feel most sorry for poor Oke, and

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frequently quite indignant with his wife. I was several times on the point of begging her to have more consideration for him, even of suggesting that this kind of behaviour, particularly before a comparative stranger like me, was very poor taste. But there was something elusive about Mrs. Oke, which made it next to impossible to speak seriously with her; and besides, I was by no means sure that any interference on my part would not merely animate her perversity.

One evening a curious incident took place. We had just sat down to dinner, the Okes, the theatrical cousin, who was down for a couple of days, and three or four neighbours. It was dusk, and the yellow light of the candles mingled charmingly with the greyness of the evening. Mrs. Oke was not well, and had been remarkably quiet all day in a diaphanous, strange, and far-away than ever; and her husband seemed to have felt a sudden return of tenderness, almost of compassion, for this delicate, fragile creature. We had been talking of quite indifferent matters, when I saw Mr. Oke suddenly turn very white, and look fixedly for a moment at the window opposite to his seat.

"Who's that fellow looking in at the window, and making signs to you, Alice? Damn his impudence!" he cried, and jumping up, ran to the window, opened it, and passed out into the twilight. We all looked at each other in surprise; some of the party remarked upon the carelessness of servants in letting nasty looking fellows hang about the kitchen, others told stories of tramps and burglars. Mrs. Oke did not speak; but I noticed the curious, distant-looking smile in her thin cheeks.

After a minute William Oke came in, his napkin in his hand. He shut the window behind him and silently resumed his place.

"Well, who was it?" we all asked.

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"Nobody. I—I must have made a mistake," he answered, and turned crimson, while he busily peeled a pear.

"It was probably Lovelock," remarked Mrs. Oke, just as she might have said, "It was probably the gardener," but with that faint smile of pleasure still in her face. Except the theatrical cousin, who burst into a loud laugh, none of the company had ever heard Lovelock's name, and, doubtless imagining him to be some natural appanage of the Oke family, groom or farmer, said nothing, so the subject dropped.

From that evening onwards things began to assume a different aspect. That incident was the beginning of a perfect system—a system of what? I scarcely know how to call it. A system of grim jokes on the part of Mrs. Oke, of superstitious fancies on the part of her husband—a system of mysterious persecutions on the part of some less earthly tenant of Okehurst. Well, yes, after all, why not? We have all heard of ghosts, had uncles, cousins, grandmothers, nurses, who have seen them; we are all a bit afraid of them at the bottom of our soul; so why shouldn't they be? I am too sceptical to believe in the impossibility of anything, for my part! Besides, when a man has lived throughout a summer in the same house with a woman like Mrs. Oke of Okehurst, he gets to believe in the possibility of a great many improbable things, I assure you, as a mere result of believing in her. And when you come to think of it, why not? That a weird creature, visibly not of this earth, a reincarnation of a woman who murdered her lover two centuries and a half ago, that such a creature should have the power of attracting about her (being altogether superior to earthly lovers) the man who loved her in that previous existence, whose love for her was his death—what is there astonishing in that? Mrs. Oke herself, I feel quite persuaded, believed or half be-

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lieved it; indeed she very seriously admitted the possibility thereof, one day that I made the suggestion half in jest. At all events, it rather pleased me to think so; it fitted in so well with the woman's whole personality; it explained those hours and hours spent all alone in the yellow room, where the very air, with its scent of heady flowers, and old perfumed stuffs, seemed redolent of ghosts. It explained that strange smile which was not for any of us, and yet was not merely for herself—that strange, far-off look in the wide pale eyes. I liked the idea, and I liked to tease, or rather to delight her with it. How should I know that the wretched husband would take such matters seriously?

He became day by day more silent and perplexed-looking; and, as a result, worked harder and probably with less effect, at his land-improvement schemes and political canvassing. It seemed to me that he was perpetually listening, watching, waiting for something to happen: a word spoken suddenly, the sharp opening of a door, would make him start, turn crimson, and almost tremble; the mention of Lovelock brought a helpless look, half a convulsion, like that of a man overcome by great heat, into his face. And his wife, so far from taking any interest in his altered looks, went on irritating him more and more. Every time that the poor fellow gave one of those starts of his, or turned crimson at the sudden sound of a foot-step, Mrs. Oke would ask him, with her contemptuous indifference, whether he had seen Lovelock. I soon began to perceive that my host was getting perfectly ill. He would sit at meals never saying a word, with his eyes fixed scrutinisingly on his wife, as if vainly trying to solve some dreadful mystery; while his wife, ethereal, exquisite, went on talking in her listless way about the masque, about Lovelock, always about Lovelock. During our walks and rides, which we continued pretty regularly, he would

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start whenever in the roads or lanes surrounding Okehurst, or in its grounds, we perceived a figure in the distance. I have seen him tremble at what, on nearer approach, I could scarcely restrain my laughter on discovering to be some well-known farmer or neighbour or servant. Once, as we were returning home at dusk, he suddenly caught my arm and pointed across the oak-dotted pastures in the direction of the garden, then started off almost at a run, with his dog behind him, as if in pursuit of some intruder.

"Who was it?" I asked. And Mr. Oke merely shook his head mournfully. Sometimes in the early autumn twilights, when the white mists rose from the park-land, and the rooks formed long black lines on the palings, I almost fancied I saw him start at the very trees and bushes, the outlines of the distant oast-houses, with their conical roofs and projecting vanes, like gibing fingers in the half light.

"Your husband is ill," I once ventured to remark to Mrs. Oke, as she sat for the hundred-and-thirtieth of my preparatory sketches (I somehow could never get beyond preparatory sketches with her). She raised her beautiful wide, pale eyes, making as she did so that exquisite curve of shoulders and neck and delicate pale head that I so vainly longed to reproduce.

"I don't see it," she answered quietly. "If he is, why doesn't he go up to town and see the doctor? It's merely one of his glum fits."

"You should not tease him about Lovelock," I added very seriously. "He will get to believe in him."

"Why not? If he sees him, why he sees him. He would not be the only person that has done so;" and she smiled faintly and half perversely, as her eyes sought that usual distant indefinable something.

But Oke got worse. He was growing perfectly unstrung, like an hysterical woman. One evening that we were sit-

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ting alone in the smoking-room, he began unexpectedly a rambling discourse about his wife; how he had first known her when they were children, and they had gone to the same dancing-school near Portland Place; how her mother, his aunt-in-law, had brought her for Christmas to Okehurst while he was on his holidays; how finally, thirteen years ago, when he was twenty-three and she was eighteen, they had been married; how terribly he had suffered when they had been disappointed of their baby, and she had nearly died of the illness.

"I did not mind about the child, you know," he said in an excited voice; "although there will be an end of us now, and Okehurst will go to the Curtises. I minded only about Alice." It was next to inconceivable that this poor excited creature, speaking almost with tears in his voice and in his eyes, was the quiet, well-got-up, irreproachable young ex-Guardsman who had walked into my studio a couple of months before.

Oke was silent for a moment, looking fixedly at the rug at his feet, when he suddenly burst out in a scarce audible voice—

"If you knew how I cared for Alice—how I still care for her. I could kiss the ground she walks upon. I would give anything—my life any day—if only she would look for two minutes as if she liked me a little—as if she didn't utterly despise me;" and the poor fellow burst into an hysterical laugh, which was almost a sob. Then he suddenly began to laugh outright, exclaiming with a sort of vulgarity of intonation which was extremely foreign to him—

"Damn it, old fellow, this is a queer world we live in!" and rang for more brandy and soda, which he was beginning, I noticed, to take pretty freely now, although he had been almost a blue-ribbon man—as much so as is possible for a hospitable country gentleman—when I first arrived.

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IX

It became clear to me now that, incredible as it might seem, the thing that ailed William Oke was jealousy. He was simply madly in love with his wife, and madly jealous of her. Jealous—but of whom? He himself would probably have been quite unable to say. In the first place—to clear off any possible suspicion—certainly not of me. Besides the fact that Mrs. Oke took only just a very little more interest in me than in the butler or the upper-housemaid, I think that Oke himself was the sort of man whose imagination would recoil from realising any definite object of jealousy, even though jealousy might be killing him inch by inch. It remained a vague, permeating, continuous feeling—the feeling that he loved her, and she did not care a jackstraw about him, and that everything with which she came into contact was receiving some of that notice which was refused to him—every person, or thing, or tree, or stone: it was the recognition of that strange far-off look in Mrs. Oke's eyes, of that strange absent smile on Mrs. Oke's lips—eyes and lips that had no look and no smile for him.

Gradually his nervousness, his watchfulness, suspiciousness, tendency to start, took a definite shape. Mr. Oke was for ever alluding to steps or voices he had heard, to figures he had seen sneaking round the house. The sudden bark of one of the dogs would make him jump up. He cleaned and loaded very carefully all the guns and revolvers in his study, and even some of the old fowling-pieces and holster-pistols in the hall. The servants and tenants thought that Oke of Okehurst had been seized with a terror of tramps and burglars. Mrs. Oke smiled contemptuously at all these doings.

“My dear William,” she said one day, “the persons who worry you have just as good a right to walk up and down the passages and staircase, and to hang about the house,

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as you or I. They were there, in all probability, long before either of us was born, and are greatly amused by your preposterous notions of privacy."

Mr. Oke laughed angrily. "I suppose you will tell me it is Lovelock—your eternal Lovelock—whose steps I hear on the gravel every night. I suppose he has as good a right to be here as you or I." And he strode out of the room.

"Lovelock—Lovelock! Why will she always go on like that about Lovelock?" Mr. Oke asked me that evening, suddenly staring me in the face.

I merely laughed.

"It's only because she has that play of his on the brain," I answered; "and because she thinks you superstitious, and likes to tease you."

"I don't understand," sighed Oke.

How could he? And if I had tried to make him do so, he would merely have thought I was insulting his wife, and have perhaps kicked me out of the room. So I made no attempt to explain psychological problems to him, and he asked me no more questions until once—— But I must first mention a curious incident that happened.

The incident was simply this. Returning one afternoon from our usual walk, Mr. Oke suddenly asked the servant whether any one had come. The answer was in the negative; but Oke did not seem satisfied. We had hardly sat down to dinner when he turned to his wife and asked, in a strange voice which I scarcely recognised as his own, who had called that afternoon.

"No one," answered Mrs. Oke; "at least to the best of my knowledge."

William Oke looked at her fixedly.

"No one?" he repeated, in a scrutinising tone; "no one, Alice?"

Mrs. Oke shook her head. "No one," she replied.

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There was a pause.

"Who was it, then, that was walking with you near the pond, about five o'clock?" asked Oke slowly.

His wife lifted her eyes straight to his and answered contemptuously—

"No one was walking with me near the pond, at five o'clock or any other hour."

Mr. Oke turned purple, and made a curious hoarse noise like a man choking.

"I—I thought I saw you walking with a man this afternoon, Alice," he brought out with an effort; adding, for the sake of appearances before me, "I thought it might have been the curate come with that report for me."

Mrs. Oke smiled.

"I can only repeat that no living creature has been near me this afternoon," she said slowly. "If you saw any one with me, it must have been Lovelock, for there certainly was no one else."

And she gave a little sigh, like a person trying to reproduce in her mind some delightful but too evanescent impression.

I looked at my host; from crimson his face had turned perfectly livid, and he breathed as if some one were squeezing his windpipe.

No more was said about the matter. I vaguely felt that a great danger was threatening. To Oke or to Mrs. Oke? I could not tell which; but I was aware of an imperious inner call to avert some dreadful evil, to exert myself, to explain, to interpose. I determined to speak to Oke the following day, for I trusted him to give me a quiet hearing, and I did not trust Mrs. Oke. That woman would slip through my fingers like a snake if I attempted to grasp her elusive character.

I asked Oke whether he would take a walk with me the next afternoon, and he accepted to do so with a curious

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eagerness. We started about three o'clock. It was a stormy, chilly afternoon, with great balls of white clouds rolling rapidly in the cold blue sky, and occasional lurid gleams of sunlight, broad and yellow, which made the black ridge of the storm, gathered on the horizon, look blue-black like ink.

We walked quickly across the sere and sodden grass of the park, and on to the highroad that led over the low hills, I don't know why, in the direction of Cotes Common. Both of us were silent, for both of us had something to say, and did not know how to begin. For my part, I recognised the impossibility of starting the subject: an uncalled-for interference from me would merely indispose Mr. Oke, and make him doubly dense of comprehension. So, if Oke had something to say, which he evidently had, it was better to wait for him.

Oke, however, broke the silence only by pointing out to me the condition of the hops, as we passed one of his many hop-gardens. "It will be a poor year," he said, stopping short and looking intently before him—"no hops at all. No hops this autumn."

I looked at him. It was clear that he had no notion what he was saying. The dark-green bines were covered with fruit; and only yesterday he himself had informed me that he had not seen such a profusion of hops for many years.

I did not answer, and we walked on. A cart met us in a dip of the road, and the carter touched his hat and greeted Mr. Oke. But Oke took no heed; he did not seem to be aware of the man's presence.

The clouds were collecting all round; black domes, among which coursed the round grey masses of fleecy stuff.

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"I think we shall be caught in a tremendous storm," I said; "hadn't we better be turning?" He nodded, and turned sharp round.

The sunlight lay in yellow patches under the oaks of the pasture-lands, and burnished the green hedges. The air was heavy and yet cold, and everything seemed preparing for a great storm. The rooks whirled in black clouds round the trees and the conical red caps of the oast-houses which give that country the look of being studded with turreted castles; then they descended—a black line—upon the fields, with what seemed an unearthly loudness of caw. And all round there arose a shrill quavering bleating of lambs and calling of sheep, while the wind began to catch the topmost branches of the trees.

Suddenly Mr. Oke broke the silence.

"I don't know you very well," he began hurriedly, and without turning his face towards me; "but I think you are honest, and you have seen a good deal of the world—much more than I. I want you to tell me—but truly, please—what do you think a man should do if"—and he stopped for some minutes.

"Imagine," he went on quickly, "that a man cares a great deal—a very great deal for his wife, and that he finds out that she—well, that—that she is deceiving him. No—don't misunderstand me; I mean—that she is constantly surrounded by some one else and will not admit it—some one whom she hides away. Do you understand? Perhaps she does not know all the risk she is running, you know, but she will not draw back—she will not avow it to her husband"—

"My dear Oke," I interrupted, attempting to take the matter lightly, "these are questions that can't be solved in the abstract, or by people to whom the thing has not

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happened. And it certainly has not happened to you or me."

Oke took no notice of my interruption. "You see," he went on, "the man doesn't expect his wife to care much about him. It's not that; he isn't merely jealous, you know. But he feels that she is on the brink of dishonouring herself—because I don't think a woman can really dishonour her husband; dishonour is in our own hands, and depends only on our own acts. He ought to save her, do you see? He must, must save her, in one way or another. But if she will not listen to him, what can he do? Must he seek out the other one, and try and get him out of the way? You see it's all the fault of the other—not hers, not hers. If only she would trust in her husband, she would be safe. But that other one won't let her."

"Look here, Oke," I said boldly, but feeling rather frightened; "I know quite well what you are talking about. And I see you don't understand the matter in the very least. I do. I have watched you and watched Mrs. Oke these six weeks, and I see what is the matter. Will you listen to me?"

And taking his arm, I tried to explain to him my view of the situation—that his wife was merely eccentric, and a little theatrical and imaginative, and that she took a pleasure in teasing him. That he, on the other hand, was letting himself get into a morbid state; that he was ill, and ought to see a good doctor. I even offered to take him to town with me.

I poured out volumes of psychological explanations. I dissected Mrs. Oke's character twenty times over, and tried to show him that there was absolutely nothing at the bottom of his suspicions beyond an imaginative *pose* and a garden-play on the brain. I adduced twenty instances, mostly invented for the nonce, of ladies of my acquaintance who had suffered from similar fads. I

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pointed out to him that his wife ought to have an outlet for her imaginative and theatrical over-energy. I advised him to take her to London and plunge her into some set where every one should be more or less in a similar condition. I laughed at the notion of there being any hidden individual about the house. I explained to Oke that he was suffering from delusions, and called upon so conscientious and religious a man to take every step to rid himself of them, adding innumerable examples of people who had cured themselves of seeing visions and of brooding over morbid fancies. I struggled and wrestled, like Jacob with the angel, and I really hoped I had made some impression. At first, indeed, I felt that not one of my words went into the man's brain—that, though silent, he was not listening. It seemed almost hopeless to present my views in such a light that he could grasp them. I felt as if I were expounding and arguing at a rock. But when I got on to the tack of his duty towards his wife and himself, and appealed to his moral and religious notions, I felt that I was making an impression.

"I daresay you are right," he said, taking my hand as we came in sight of the red gables of Okehurst, and speaking in a weak, tired, humble voice. "I don't understand you quite, but I am sure what you say is true. I daresay it is all that I'm seedy. I feel sometimes as if I were mad, and just fit to be locked up. But don't think I don't struggle against it. I do, I do continually, only sometimes it seems too strong for me. I pray God night and morning to give me the strength to overcome my suspicions, or to remove these dreadful thoughts from me. God knows, I know what a wretched creature I am, and how unfit to take care of that poor girl."

And Oke again pressed my hand. As we entered the garden, he turned to me once more.

"I am very, very grateful to you," he said, "and, in-

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deed, I will do my best to try and be stronger. If only," he added, with a sigh, "if only Alice would give me a moment's breathing-time, and not go on day after day mocking me with her Lovelock."

X

I had begun Mrs. Oke's portrait, and she was giving me a sitting. She was unusually quiet that morning; but, it seemed to me, with the quietness of a woman who is expecting something, and she gave me the impression of being extremely happy. She had been reading, at my suggestion, the "*Vita Nuova*" which she did not know before, and the conversation came to roll upon that, and upon the question whether love so abstract and so enduring was a possibility. Such a discussion, which might have savoured of flirtation in the case of almost any other young and beautiful woman, became in the case of Mrs. Oke something quite different; it seemed distant, intangible, not of this earth, like her smile and the look in her eyes.

"Such love as that," she said, looking into the far distance of the oak-dotted park-land, "is very rare, but it can exist. It becomes a person's whole existence, his whole soul; and it can survive the death, not merely of the beloved, but of the lover. It is unextinguishable, and goes on in the spiritual world until it meets a re-incarnation of the beloved; and when this happens, it jeers out and draws to it all that may remain of that lover's soul, and takes shape and surrounds the beloved one once more."

Mrs. Oke was speaking slowly, almost to herself, and I had never, I think, seen her look so strange and so beautiful, the stiff white dress bringing out but the more exotic exquisiteness and incorporeality of her person.

I did not know what to answer, so I said half in jest—

"I fear you have been reading too much Buddhist

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literature, Mrs. Oke. There is something dreadfully esoteric in all you say."

She smiled contemptuously.

"I know people can't understand such matters," she replied, and was silent for some time. But, through her quietness and silence, I felt, as it were, the throb of a strange excitement in this woman, almost as if I had been holding her pulse.

Still, I was in hopes that things might be beginning to go better in consequence of my interference. Mrs. Oke had scarcely once alluded to Lovelock in the last two or three days; and Oke had been much more cheerful and natural since our conversation. He no longer seemed so worried; and once or twice I had caught in him a look of great gentleness and loving-kindness, almost of pity, towards some young and very frail thing, as he sat opposite his wife.

But the end had come. After that sitting Mrs. Oke had complained of fatigue and retired to her room, and Oke had driven off on some business to the nearest town. I felt all alone in the big house, and after having worked a little at a sketch I was making in the park, I amused myself rambling about the house.

It was a warm, enervating, autumn afternoon: the kind of weather that brings the perfume out of everything, the damp ground and fallen leaves, the flowers in the jars, the old woodwork and stuffs; that seems to bring on to the surface of one's consciousness all manner of vague recollections and expectations, a something half pleasurable, half painful, that makes it impossible to do or to think. I was the prey of this particular, not at all unpleasurable, restlessness. I wandered up and down the corridors, stopping to look at the pictures, which I knew already in every detail, to follow the pattern of the carvings and old stuffs, to stare at the autumn flowers,

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arranged in magnificent masses of colour in the big china bowls and jars. I took up one book after another and threw it aside; then I sat down to the piano and began to play irrelevant fragments. I felt quite alone, although I had heard the grind of the wheels on the gravel, which meant that my host had returned. I was lazily turning over a book of verses—I remember it perfectly well, it was Morris's 'Love is Enough'—in a corner of the drawing-room, when the door suddenly opened and William Oke showed himself. He did not enter, but beckoned to me to come out to him. There was something in his face that made me start up and follow him at once. He was extremely quiet, even stiff, not a muscle of his face moving, but very pale.

"I have something to show you," he said, leading me through the vaulted hall, hung round with ancestral pictures, into the gravelled space that looked like a filled-up moat, where stood the big blasted oak, with its twisted, pointing branches. I followed him on to the lawn, or rather the piece of park-land that ran up to the house. We walked quickly, he in front, without exchanging a word. Suddenly he stopped, just where there jutted out the bow-window of the yellow drawing-room, and I felt Oke's hand tight upon my arm.

"I have brought you here to see something," he whispered hoarsely; and he led me to the window.

I looked in. The room, compared with the out door, was rather dark; but against the yellow wall I saw Mrs. Oke sitting alone on a couch in her white dress, her head slightly thrown back, a large red rose in her hand.

"Do you believe now?" whispered Oke's voice hot at my ear. "Do you believe now? Was it all my fancy? But I will have him this time. I have locked the door inside, and, by God! he shan't escape."

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The words were not out of Oke's mouth. I felt myself struggling with him silently outside that window. But he broke loose, pulled open the window, and leapt into the room, and I after him. As I crossed the threshold, something flashed in my eyes; there was a loud report, a sharp cry, and the thud of a body on the ground.

Oke was standing in the middle of the room, with a faint smoke about him; and at his feet, sunk down from the sofa, with her blond head resting on its seat, lay Mrs. Oke, a pool of red forming in her white dress. Her mouth was convulsed, as if in that automatic shriek, but her wide-open white eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly.

I know nothing of time. It all seemed to be one second, but a second that lasted hours. Oke stared, then turned round and laughed.

"The damned rascal has given me the slip again!" he cried; and quickly unlocking the door, rushed out of the house with dreadful cries.

That is the end of the story. Oke tried to shoot himself that evening, but merely fractured his jaw, and died a few days later, raving. There were all sorts of legal inquiries, through which I went as through a dream, and whence it resulted that Mr. Oke had killed his wife in a fit of momentary madness. That was the end of Alice Oke. By the way, her maid brought me a locket which was found round her neck, all stained with blood. It contained some very dark auburn hair, not at all the colour of William Oke's. I am quite sure it was Lovelock's.

